FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR ARISE ZHANG, ALSO KNOWN AS
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Book
3
DINGHAI
FUSHENG
RECORDS

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DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS

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DINGHAI FUSHENG RECORDS (NOVEL) VOL. 3

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Chapter 48

IN HUANMO PALACE, a scholar held a glass bowl that was filled with viscous blood. The blood seemed to be slowly squirming, as if it were alive. On the platform before the scholar lay the burnt body of Sima Wei, and three balls of blazing black flame were situated close by. One of these orbs depicted Chang'an, another Xiangyang, and the third a verdant mountain.

At the center of it all was the Demon God's Heart. "How is the plan proceeding?" it asked.

"Very smoothly," the scholar replied.

The heart made its displeasure known. "Very smoothly? Three important weapons—the Yin Yang Mirror, the Zheng Drum, and the Deer Cry Staff—have fallen into the enemy's hands. Zhou Zhen has perished, and the resentment we spent so much effort to gather in the Yaoguang Star, Kaiyang Star, and Yuheng Star has dissipated. Far from increasing in number, the drought fiend army is dwindling by the day. Two of the Eight Princes, who were supposed to guard the array, are gone. Wang Hai, is this what you call 'smoothly'?"

"My lord, you need not worry," the scholar named Wang Hai said confidently, tilting the glass bowl in his hand. The blood fell like a viscous paste onto Sima Wei's remains, where it seeped, wriggling, through the skin and began repairing the scorched body. "If nothing else, they still haven't discovered the Ten Thousand Spirits Array. It's true that our drought fiend army has sharply decreased in number, but we can create as many more drought fiends as we want—there are humans everywhere. We should lie low for now to avoid being noticed. As for the three demonic weapons, we

can decide on an opportune time to retrieve them. The seven components of the Ten Thousand Spirits Array will be activated as scheduled."

The heart let out a disdainful *humph*.

Wang Hai watched Sima Wei's body. "The exorcists think themselves clever, but they're only fooling themselves; they believe they can control these magical artifacts with the murderous qi left in them now. In the end, they will fall victim to the artifacts' ingenuity, and the resentment will come back to bite them…" As Sima Wei's lightning-charred body was slowly restored, Wang Hai turned around and walked toward the giant heart. "The war in the north has helped me formulate an important hypothesis. If it bears out, then the artifact that will reconstruct your body for you at the eye of the array will be an unparalleled treasure. You won't need to use the Heart Lamp after all."

The heart didn't reply. Perhaps it doubted his words.

"My lord," Wang Hai continued, "please take a look at this. The Dinghai Pearl, which you have been seeking for more than three hundred years, may have already appeared."

Wang Hai waved his sleeve, and a small copper bell about the size of his palm appeared in his hand. There was a clear clanging sound from the bell, and black flames appeared all around Wang Hai, projecting a frozen, snowy scene from the banks of the Xarusgol River a few months prior. In the scene, a flock of crows landed quietly around the Akele tribe's campsite. One of the crows turned toward a tent.

"Xiang Yuyan's son," a voice said. "Where? Where is he?"

The heart started beating faster, and Huanmo Palace flooded with purple-red light.

With another burst of black flames, the figures of Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, the Akele king, and the Akele king's consort appeared inside the royal tent. Xiang Shu was asking, "When did she go to Lake Barkol?"

"Twenty-two years ago, before you were born," said the voice of the consort. "She was walking all the way north the first time I saw her, and she told me she was looking for someone—a man."

"Bring this woman to me," the Demon God's Heart commanded.

"She was the consort of the Akele king, but she is dead," Wang Hai replied. "Che Luofeng killed her, and the exorcist burnt her corpse to ashes."

"You fool!" the Demon God's Heart bellowed. "Three hundred years! It took a whole three hundred years to find this clue!"

"My lord, please rest assured—now that we know Xiang Yuyan was Shulü Kong's mother, the answer we seek lies right in front of us. I will pour all of my energy into searching for the Dinghai Pearl. If my humble hypothesis is proven true, then your new body will possess an immense power that even the ancient gods could not match. Even the ending of the Battle of Banquan shall be rewritten if you desire."

The heart burst out in a frenzy of laughter.

March in Jiankang.

The city was filled with willows, and the cries of spring birds rang through the air. A gentle breeze blew through the bright and airy rooms of the palace, and the imperial courtyard's beauty was divine.

Chen Xing's first thought when he came ashore was: *I'm finally home*. The Jiankang before him truly possessed the beauty captured in Ban

Gu's "Rhapsody of the Two Capitals":

"The ritual officers order the ceremonies,

And the imperial entourage then exits.

And then they raise the whale,

And strike the engraved bell.

The emperor mounts the Jade Carriage,

Hitches the seasonal dragons.

The phoenix canopy hangs lush and luxuriant;

Crossbar and simurgh bells jingle and jangle.

The imperial officers follow like shadows

In a splendid display of dignity and decorum."

Nearly seventy years had passed since the Yongjia Rebellion ravaged the Central Plains, when Luoyang had been sacked by the Xiongnu. The Han people had migrated south after that catastrophe, bringing with them the flourishing beauty of their two former capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang. It was as if, during their migration, each Jin government official had carried a magnificent picture scroll clasped under their arm, then unhurriedly spread it toward the Yangtze River's bank upon their arrival. These picture scrolls unfurled as if they had a life of their own, and thousands of years of splendid cultural heritage reappeared in all its glory.

Ever since the time of the Sun Wu state in the Three Kingdoms era, Jiankang had been the home of the emperor. When Sima Yan, the Emperor of Jin, unified the nation, Sun Hao, the Emperor of Wu, capitulated and surrendered the city. That meant that Jiankang had never experienced war, and now, millions of families lived there. The large-scale Han migration to

the south had brought both books and advancements in farming to the land. It introduced poems and paintings, not to mention the technique of refining metal. Now, the city of Jiankang, located along the Huai River and flanked on the east by Mount Zhong, was the center of the Divine Land. Along with the cities of Bancheng, Moling, and Fushe to the west and Danyang and Langya in the south, the ten thousand miles south of the Yangtze River contained all of the salt, iron, coal, and silk in the world. There was a market every hundred steps and a city every ten miles. Medical treatments, books, paintings, music, entertainment, and trade and commerce made for prosperous conditions for countless artisans.

Ever since the time of the Qin and Han dynasties, the Jiangnan region had been a land of plentiful fish and rice. Books and ink were expensive, but grain and rice were cheap. Under Fu Jian's rule in the north, a pound of rice cost twelve coins; in Jiankang it was only three coins. Jiankang was even more prosperous than the "divinely blessed" region of Shu;[1] nobody died of hunger, and in exceptionally bountiful years, bran and grain were used as mere livestock feed. If every county produced a bumper crop, there would be so much grain left over that it would be left to rot in a storehouse to feed the rats. Such affordable rice naturally gave rise to talents of all kinds. In the early years of the Taiyuan era, the south was bursting with talented individuals. Among the millions of families in Jiankang there were almost a hundred thousand scholars, both people who'd migrated there and from the region's local families, who spent their time idle in the city. With the Jin government having no more vacant government positions to offer, the scholars had nothing to do but while their time away discussing politics all day long.

This was Xiang Shu's formal introduction to the world of the Han people, and he found himself stunned. He had heard Hu people speak of the "south," but it was even more glorious than the stories made it out to be. After Xie An greeted the two of them, he took it upon himself to drive Chen Xing and Xiang Shu along the Qinhuai River in an open-top carriage so that they could have a tour of the city as they made their way to their lodgings.

When Chen Xing saw the look on Xiang Shu's face, he knew that he had been awed by Jiankang's atmosphere, and he felt a slight stab of rather irrational pride. It was Chen Xing's first time in Jiankang as well, and even he was a little surprised by it.

"I received your letter on the road and guessed that you would arrive today," Xie An said, smiling. "So I came to welcome you, though I may have been a little presumptuous."

"You were not! You were not presumptuous at all!" Chen Xing was very satisfied. Xie An truly hadn't overstepped in the slightest, and the welcome reception he'd arranged was grand enough that Chen Xing could show off a little to Xiang Shu. He was pleased. But, he realized quickly, the scholars who had welcomed them didn't seem to look at him the same way that they looked at Xiang Shu. The gazes with which they looked upon Chen Xing were filled with curiosity and appreciation, but when they looked at Xiang Shu, it was more awe and admiration.

When they boarded the carriage, he heard the people there whisper, "To think such a beautiful man actually exists…"

"You guys are too loud!" Chen Xing snapped. "I can hear everything you're whispering about!"

“Xiaoshidi, how does Jiankang compare to Chang’an?” Xie An asked, redirecting the conversation.

“Um…” Chen Xing was a little taken aback by the swift change in topic. “Oh right, I wanted to ask when I got off the ship: Xie-daren, when did we become fellow disciples?”

Chen Xing had racked his brains but could not come up with an answer. Xie An had studied under the famous scholar Huan Yi, who Chen Xing was sure had no relation at all to his own father, Chen Zhe. The only thing connecting them was that they were both scholars. Was that it?

“The chivalrous Sir Baili once promised to take me in as a disciple,” Xie An said with a smile. “You were still young then, so you probably don’t remember it.”

“He did?” Chen Xing’s doubts shot through the roof. He did have a shixiong, Wang Meng, but he didn’t recall his shifu having ever taken on Xie An as a disciple. But if Xie An insisted, there was no harm in letting him have it. It didn’t cost Chen Xing anything.

Xiang Shu glanced at Xie An while Chen Xing replied easily to Xie An’s original question. “Fu Jian does govern Chang’an quite well, but it still falls short compared to Jiankang.”

“Falls short” was an understatement. If the two cities had been riders, Chang’an couldn’t have caught up with Jiankang even if it urged its horse to gallop at full speed. Fu Jian was at a disadvantage because the previous few northern monarchs—Liu Yuan, Ran Min, Shi Chong, and the rest—had killed so many people and chased all the Han away. Chang’an had been left destitute when Fu Jian took over; he’d had to rebuild it from scratch.

Chen Xing explained briefly to Xiang Shu that Xie An was not an exorcist. Xiang Shu didn't respond, instead shifting his gaze to the houses by the street. One of the alleys along the way boasted hundreds of large houses that were a lot more impressive than even Tuoba Yan's house in Chang'an. Were even the buildings more luxurious in Jiankang?

"Is that some special residence?" Chen Xing asked.

"I don't know," Xie An replied. "These houses belong to those who are less well-off; please pay them no mind. We live on Wuyi Lane."

This rendered Chen Xing just as speechless as Xiang Shu.

Xie An was over forty years old, but he had kept his appearance neat. A few wisps of a beard hung from his chin, and he carried an ancient jade pendant tied around his waist. Unlike the ostentatious Hu, who liked to hang all sorts of accessories from their bodies, everything on him seemed to sit just right. He always smiled while he spoke. Usually, when men reached his age and still bore the looks of a twenty- or thirty-year-old, they relied on two things to keep being seen as young and handsome: knowledge and money.

"This good fellow…" Xie An began.

"I'm mute," Xiang Shu replied coldly.

A sense of awkwardness came over Chen Xing, but Xie An dispelled it with a sudden burst of laughter. He moved as if he wanted to pat Xiang Shu's shoulder, but he took special care to not actually touch Xiang Shu's body. Watching this, Chen Xing knew that Xie An had realized Xiang Shu was a Hu. Hu men didn't like having their shoulders touched.

"Great music often comes from the faintest notes," Xie An went on, "and men of great wisdom often appear slow-witted. These are the

principles of the world.” Then he fell silent as if deep in thought, and he glanced at Chen Xing meaningfully.

“Xiang Shu is my protector,” Chen Xing explained.

“It looks like your journey here has been very smooth,” Xie An said approvingly.

“Sort of, I guess.” Chen Xing didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “It really is a long story…”

“Well, I’m guessing that you’ll probably have to linger for quite some time in Jiankang, so don’t worry; you can take your time recounting the tale. Come, we’ve arrived. Let’s hold a welcome reception for you first!”

The carriage had reached Wuyi Lane only to stop at a door that seemed very small. Its lintel was carved from a three-foot-long piece of jade from the Kunlun Mountains. Two “xie” characters were written on the vermillion door in a straight and elegant hand, and Chen Xing couldn’t help exclaiming in admiration.

Xie An turned at that, smiling. “Youjun, my shidi is praising you for your beautiful handwriting.”

Following behind Xie An was the man who had written those words for Xie An. His name was Wang Xizhi.[2] He waved his hands, modestly declining the compliment, and said, “I’ll go home now for a change of clothes and come over later for tea.” The Wang residence was located directly opposite the Xie residence.

Chen Xing was in a cheery mood as he entered the Xie house. Xie An had assumed an official position in the imperial court and had purchased this residence himself rather than living with the rest of the Xie family. The scholars who had come to welcome them filed into the Xie residence in an

orderly manner, and though the front door wasn't big, the space within was very expansive. It contained a little of everything, from pavilions to ponds and rockeries. The main part of the residence occupied an area several acres wide. For all of that to exist behind such a small door was almost unimaginable.

Once he'd ensured that Chen Xing and Xiang Shu had a set of rooms to rest in, Xie An invited Chen Xing to have tea in the main hall. Xiang Shu was surveying his quarters when Chen Xing came over to ask him to come with him.

"Are the two of you very close friends?" Xiang Shu asked with a frown.

"No," Chen Xing admitted, smiling. He knew what Xiang Shu was thinking—that anyone offering such warm hospitality had to be scheming something. After what Chen Xing had experienced in Chang'an, it made sense for Xiang Shu to be at least somewhat wary. "When I was studying on Mount Hua, he came to visit once. He mentioned then that if we ever needed anything, he would be willing to support us in any way he could."

Chen Xing had once seen Xie An talking to his shifu. After that, he'd heard from his shifu that Xie An had come to their doorstep specifically to seek him out. Xie An had always liked roaming the wilderness, visiting famous rivers and mountains, and he also yearned for the stuff of strange legends, like cultivation, flying on swords, and capturing yao.

Regrettably, Xie An was not from an exorcist family. After the Silence of All Magic, there was no more mana in the world, and a lot of common exorcism-related things became legends. Xie An's great dream of finding cultivators in seclusion had come to seem less and less possible as

he aged—but then, one day, he was lucky enough to find Mount Hua. Wanting nothing more than to become an exorcist, Xie An expressed his willingness to do all he could to support the restoration of the Exorcism Department.

Before Chen Xing left the mountain, his shifu wrote a letter that quickly secured him Xie An's support. And that wasn't all. When Chen Xing and his shifu were cultivating on Mount Hua, they'd needed money to support their daily lives. Chen Xing's shifu was named Baili Lun, and he said that he was an assassin who had once been helped by the Chen family. What did an assassin know of tilling the land and sowing crops? All assassins knew how to do was kill the occasional corrupt official for the good of the common people. That was not something that earned them a lot of money, so Chen Xing's shifu had racked up a considerable debt instead.

When Xie An visited and learned that Baili Lun and Chen Xing were strapped for cash, he dipped into his own pockets and paid off their debts without saying a word. He left them a lot of money on top of that. After that, Chen Xing's shifu heaped a great deal of praise on Chen Xing, adding that Sui Xing's blessing was impressive indeed. That had left a deep impression on Chen Xing, which was how he remembered that Xie An had given his shifu three thousand taels of silver.

"He wants to become an exorcist?" Xiang Shu asked.

"It's a beautiful kind of yearning, right? It's one of those dreams you have when you're young, where you want to be chivalrous and fly around on swords, not tied down by the secular world. To go around capturing and exorcizing yao and fighting against injustice."

Chen Xing did think Xie An was being a bit overenthusiastic; Xiang Shu wasn't wrong. But he had nothing that was worth Xie An's scheming. Besides, Xie An knew who Chen Xing's shifu was and where their sect was located—if he was part of Shi Hai's group, he'd have had ample opportunities to plot against Chen Xing already. He needn't have waited until now.

All the same, after speaking with Xiang Shu, Chen Xing felt a little more suspicious. "Let's go," he said. "We can find out what he has to say."

The scholars in the hall had been waiting for Chen Xing for quite a while. After Chen Xing and Xiang Shu settled into their seats, Xie An began by introducing his nephew, Xie Xuan. Next came the introductions to Wang Xizhi and the various sons and nephews of the Wang family. With so many people coming up to him all in a row, Chen Xing couldn't keep track of who was who. He could only offer polite but superficial greetings. When the host raised his cup, everyone partook of the tea, which was served in wide, shallow-bottomed bowls. Each bowl of tea was also accompanied by a small, sweet dessert.

Chen Xing imagined Xiang Shu was probably cursing to himself that these Han had served him such a small cup of tea. Not even enough for a gulp!

After tea came the socializing. Chen Xing talked about his sect and his shifu before everyone focused on Xiang Shu again.

"May I know… What is this beautiful man's name?" Xie Xuan asked.

People all across the world judged others by their appearances, and from the moment the two of them had come ashore, Chen Xing had noticed people sneaking looks at Xiang Shu. On their way to Xie An's residence, it

hadn’t seemed to matter whether the passersby were men or women, old or young—everyone had a few glances to spare for him.

When the younger generation of the Wang and Xie families saw how handsome Xiang Shu was—and the sword strapped to his back, which made him look like a gallant swordsman—they’d immediately formed a favorable impression of him and decided to cozy up to him. Unfortunately for them, Xiang Shu was seated inconveniently at Xie An’s side. They kept trying to shoot him meaningful glances, but Xiang Shu just pretended he didn’t see them. Now that it was finally time for Chen Xing to formally introduce him, everyone sat up straight and smiled hard at Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing saw that Xiang Shu didn’t seem to have the slightest intention of speaking, so he would have to make the introduction on Xiang Shu’s behalf. “He’s my…”

He’d been planning to fabricate an origin for Xiang Shu: “He’s my protector from the Xiang family in Kuaiji.” But with the words on the tip of his tongue, he faltered, remembering Xiang Shu had mentioned his concerns about his background. At least in this situation, Chen Xing understood, so he respected Xiang Shu’s wishes and took a different approach.

“He’s my Hu friend. Family name Shulü, personal name Kong. He’s from Chi Le Chuan’s Tiele tribe.”

The entire hall fell silent. Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, looking a little surprised, but there was also a hint of a smile in his eyes. His lips moved slightly, silently. Chen Xing realized what he was saying: “Thank you.”

Xie An shot a quick glance at Chen Xing, knowing the situation was about to go sideways. The Hu and Han peoples still harbored great enmity for each other. The scholars of the Jiangnan region hated the Hu of the north so much that when they took them as prisoners of war they would happily dismember them, and here was Chen Xing, jabbing a stick right into the hornet's nest! This was going to become a disaster!

Sure enough, the silence only lasted for about three seconds before an uproar broke out in the hall.

"What?!"

"A Hu?"

"How did a Hu get in? And he's a Tiele too?"

"Report him! Report him to the officials now!"

Xiang Shu frowned slightly and looked at Chen Xing. He placed his right hand on the hilt of his sword and swept his gaze over the hall. Some of the scholars, looking humiliated in the extreme, got up to leave, but others merely frowned a little—they didn't care so much about the fight between the Hu and Han. They just wanted to see how Chen Xing would resolve this crisis.

As for Chen Xing, he was shocked that everyone was reacting like this. The scholars who had stood up were all aflutter. A flurry of thoughts zipped through Xie An's mind, but just as he was about to step in, Chen Xing smacked his palm on the table—Xie An stopped himself.

"Wait!" Chen Xing said. "Everyone, please stop!"

Chapter 49

"MAY THIS HUMBLE one pose a question to all the gentlemen here?" Chen Xing asked with a smile. "Who here holds a grudge against the Tiele tribe? If so, feel free to draw your sword and come forward. I'll settle the score for my friend with my life."

The crowd found itself at a loss for words. The Tiele tribe, to which Xiang Shu belonged, had never slaughtered Han people. On the few occasions the Tiele had entered the Central Plains, it had been to assist Fu Jian in quelling internal conflicts among the Hu.

One scholar sneered. "The Hu have beastly faces and shifty eyes, flocking together like vermin. Whether Tiele, Xiongnu, Di, or Xianbei, they have all slaughtered Han civilians; they are all mortal enemies of our Great Jin. What difference does it make? Are the Tiele not Hu people? Why can't we take our revenge?"

Weren't you just praising Xiang Shu on the road, calling him a gentleman as refined as jade? Chen Xing thought. *And now he's just vermin?* Scholars truly were capricious.

"Going by your logic," Chen Xing replied sincerely, "Hu people are people, and Han people are people too. If one wants to take revenge, then they should just kill 'people.' Why go through all this trouble?"

At this, several people failed to hold back their laughter. The scholar's face reddened in anger as he snapped, "What nonsense! How could the two be equal?"

“Of course, they’re not equal,” Chen Xing said after a moment’s thought. “To me, neither Hu people nor Han people are ‘people.’ So, shall we all sit down and talk?”

“What do you mean by that?” Xie Xuan interjected.

“A person has an identity and a form,” Chen Xing explained. “‘Hu’ and ‘Han’ are labels that designate ethnicity. Just as a ‘white horse’ is not simply a ‘horse,’ a Hu person is not simply a ‘person.’ It’s the same logic.”

Xiang Shu shot Chen Xing an astonished look, and the entire hall erupted in laughter. Xie An narrowed his eyes slightly, realizing that Chen Xing was deliberately engaging in the local custom of philosophical debate. What Chen Xing meant by that statement was that “Hu” and “Han” were broad terms of ethnic grouping and didn’t capture the full essence of being a “person.” His logic echoed the White Horse Paradox put forth by the Warring States philosopher Gongsun Long. In the intellectual circles of Jiangdong, such philosophical debates were familiar and beloved. In offering this argument, Chen Xing was essentially inviting everyone to counter him, so those who had risen to confront him sat down again, eager to engage in a battle of wits.

“A Hu person is a type of person,” another scholar argued, “just as a Han person is a type of person. Like rivers flowing into the sea, true debate isn’t sophistry, young man. We’ve long since exhausted such arguments.”

Chen Xing changed tack. “Then let me ask everyone: What is a person? Before we argue about whether the Tiele are Hu or whether you should bear a grudge against them, we should first clarify what it means to be a person, don’t you think?”

His question left them all momentarily speechless. While the question “Is a Hu person a person?” wasn’t hard to explain, few had ever pondered the true essence of a person.

At first, Xiang Shu was certain that things wouldn’t end well. He was prepared to grab Chen Xing and charge out the moment someone reported them to the authorities. The hall was packed, but these people were all scholars, so he knew they’d be no match for him in combat; he could even save Xie An some face by pulling his blows. He was surprised, then, when Chen Xing deftly navigated the situation with his words alone, putting everyone on the spot. The situation no longer seemed as bad as Xiang Shu had feared—although, admittedly, he found the entire exchange rather perplexing.

Wang Xizhi chuckled. “Everyone present here is a person. What need is there to question that?”

Chen Xing thought for a moment. “That’s not necessarily true. To understand what we are, we must first clearly define it. Otherwise, how can we use that concept to define ourselves?”

“Well said,” Xie Xuan agreed, having been drawn into Chen Xing’s rhetorical trap. The saying that “humans are the spirit of all living things” had been passed down since ancient times, but a clear and precise definition of what constitutes a human being was something that even the wisest sages had struggled to formulate.

The hall fell silent for a moment before someone else ventured to speak. “Five feet and six inches tall, distinct limbs, hair on the head, and teeth in the mouth—such a being is called human.”

Chen Xing rebutted this quote from *Liezi: The Yellow Emperor* without hesitation. “Then what about someone who is six feet tall? Or five feet? Are short people not human?”

“A being born with two hands, two feet, and a single head is human,” someone else chimed in. It was the scholar who had earlier insisted on reporting Xiang Shu’s presence to the authorities.

Chen Xing smiled. “What about those born missing a hand or a foot? And if someone dares to say that soldiers who lose limbs in battle are no longer human, I’ll be the first to object.”

“A being born with three immortal souls and seven mortal forms, regardless of physical form, is human,” Xie An proposed.

This statement touched on the metaphysical essence of humanity and immediately enlightened the scholars in the room, drawing murmurs of admiration. Yet Chen Xing countered once again. “Then if a person’s three souls and seven forms are gone, does that mean they’re no longer human?”

Xiang Shu, who had been watching quietly, thought, *Isn’t that obvious?*

“That would just be an empty shell,” Xie An replied calmly.

“It looks like we can take our revenge now,” someone suggested.

“Hold on, hold on,” Chen Xing interrupted. “If I’m not mistaken, a person who’s lost their three immortal souls and seven mortal forms is called a dead person. Now let me ask you: Is a dead person still a human?” The crowd erupted with people cursing at him, but Chen Xing was unflappable. “‘Dead’ is just a label, and humans are defined by both name and form. If a dead person isn’t considered human, then by that logic, a Hu person can’t be considered human either.”

The entire hall stared at Chen Xing in silence. So did Xiang Shu.

“How can the dead be the same as a Hu?” someone asked. The Han people were clearly dissatisfied with Chen Xing’s sophistry.

Xiang Shu, who wasn’t pleased with Chen Xing himself, asked, “Are you indirectly insulting me?”

“All right,” Chen Xing said hastily, “let’s put it another way. Do cats and dogs have three immortal souls and seven mortal forms?”

Xie An kept silent.

“If cats and dogs have three souls and seven forms,” Chen Xing continued, looking puzzled, “does that mean they can be considered human? And if your answer is that they don’t, who can prove that no living creatures other than humans have three immortal souls and seven mortal forms?”

Xie An had backed himself into a corner. He could have tried to argue that no beings other than humans possessed complete mortal and immortal souls, but where was the evidence? To claim that humans were the only creatures with souls would have required first proving that no other animals possessed them.

The concept of souls remained speculative, but trying to prove that they didn’t exist was a fool’s errand. The argument lacked theoretical support, and moreover, Chen Xing could have easily countered with examples like the theory of the six realms of reincarnation, the yin-yang theory, or even the idea of reincarnation itself. If humans could be reborn in their next lives as animals, then animals, like humans, must have souls.

“There are also people who are born missing parts of their souls,” added Chen Xing. “Surely we wouldn’t consider them nonhuman? And

setting that aside, there are stories of fox spirits who cultivate themselves into human form, appearing no different from us except for a trace of lingering animal nature. Are such transformed yao to be considered human? Why, then, does the world not regard yao as humans?"

"That's a different matter," Xie An said firmly. "After all, none of us have ever seen a fox yao, so it's impossible to study them."

"Well, none of us have ever seen souls either," Chen Xing agreed with a smile. "So I suppose the concept of souls should have no part in this discussion."

"Yes, yes," everyone else muttered, wiping the sweat from their brows.

But then the room fell silent. Now that the topic had circled back, no one could come up with an answer to Chen Xing's question about the definition of "human."

After a long moment of thought, Xie An said, "'Human' is merely a conventionally agreed-upon term. It's up to us how we refer to humans. There's not much purpose in getting hung up on a term."

"But no one has ever told us how this term came to be," Chen Xing countered. "I'm curious, and I'd like to discuss this frankly and thoroughly with my brothers. Surely that's understandable."

Xie An's deflection attempt had failed. *What now?* he thought, scratching his back.

"Well then, Tianchi-xiongdi, what's your take on this?" said Xie Xuan.

Chen Xing was taken aback. "Wait, it's my turn again?"

Chen Xing dealt with scholars in the same way Xiang Shu handled warriors, and perhaps even more cleanly. While Xiang Shu could single-handedly take on an army, he still had to fight its members one at a time; Chen Xing took on packs of scholars with his words and dispatched multiple opponents at once in classic group attacks. He had a slew of questions ready: “Are immortals considered humans? If immortals aren’t human, why are they called ‘immortal’ humans?” Once the matter of immortals was resolved, he planned to move on to ancestors, deities, apes and monkeys that communicated with gestures and sounds, and even parrots that could mimic human speech.

But it didn’t seem that he would need to use these attacks after all. This group appeared to be unexpectedly low on resilience—they were already showing signs of surrender. Xie An gestured for Chen Xing to speak. If Chen Xing wanted to prove his point, he’d need to offer a strong enough argument to convince the masses.

“In my humble opinion,” Chen Xing said, draining the last of his tea and speaking earnestly, “a being with a true heart is a human.”

The gathered scholars jeered, but as the noise subsided, an unexpected silence fell over the room. No one could bring themselves to refute Chen Xing’s statement.

This was because the term “true heart” was notoriously complex to define. Mencius once illustrated it through the “I like fish, and I also like bear’s paws” parable, which emphasized the moral choice of sacrificing one’s life for righteousness—an act stemming from the true heart. Chen Xing’s usage of the term, however, extended beyond the scope of Confucian teachings, encompassing a broader and deeper meaning.

“What does ‘true heart’ even mean?” someone else asked. “Are we going to start debating that next? What’s the point in just going around in endless circles?”

“We’re not going around in circles at all,” Chen Xing replied. “It’s the heart that discerns right from wrong. It has the resilience to remain unshaken by external forces, the clarity to remain unclouded by selfish desires, the freedom to be unbound, and the innocence to act without being swayed by others…”

As he spoke, Chen Xing’s gaze unintentionally landed on Xiang Shu, who had been watching him intently. Their eyes met for a brief moment

before they both awkwardly averted their gazes, and Chen Xing stumbled over his words.

"…Well, anyway," he continued, "it's difficult to explain all of this in detail. You've all read about these concepts in books, so there's no need for me to elaborate. Defining 'true heart' precisely is challenging, yes, but I believe everyone here intuitively understands what it is. To recognize the true heart is, after all, an act guided by the true heart itself."

"So here's the problem," Xie Xuan said. "If someone loses their true heart, does that mean they're no longer human?"

"Of course," Chen Xing replied with a smile, catching Xiang Shu watching him again from the corner of his eye and pretending not to notice. "When we accuse others of being 'no better than beasts' or say 'you're not human,' we don't say it in jest, do we?"

A young disciple from the Wang family chimed in. "So does that mean a child who hasn't yet begun their education doesn't count as human? If so, I can't agree with that."

"Who said a child lacks a true heart?" Chen Xing shot back. "How would you explain the saying 'as innocent and pure as a child'? The true heart is like a lamp within—it's naturally present where it should be."

"In troubled times," someone else argued, "there are people who exchange their children for food or forgive their traitor fathers. Are they not human? I think it's simply a matter of some being inherently good and others inherently evil."

"I suppose no one here would consider those with an inherently evil nature human," Chen Xing said, "so I needn't say a word."

“And what about those who lose their true heart but later abandon evil and embrace good?” another Xie family disciple asked.

“If you’re willing to forgive them, then of course turning back leads to salvation, and everyone would consider them human again,” Chen Xing replied. “That’s what we mean when we say something’s ‘conventionally agreed upon,’ isn’t it? That’s how the true heart defines what it means to be human. In the end, a true heart is the proof of one’s humanity, and it’s something that can be recognized from far away. My brother here, Shulü Kong, has always been clear in his sense of right and wrong, always willing to sacrifice his life for righteousness. He has never killed an innocent person, nor has he ever been an enemy to the Han. Among the Hu people, there are those who are driven by a thirst for cruelty, who slaughter the innocent, but there are also those who care for the world and strive to protect their country and their people. If that weren’t true, why would Shulü Kong ever have followed me to Jiankang, subjected himself to your ridicule, and engaged in this pointless endeavor?”

After a long, winding detour, Chen Xing finally returned to the main point. He smiled at Xiang Shu, who was no longer avoiding his gaze, though he had adopted a difficult-to-read expression.

The scholars’ hostility toward Xiang Shu had diminished, and they had been so caught up in Chen Xing’s roundabout reasoning that now they didn’t know what to say. After an awkward silence, Xie An, the host, finally cleared his throat and broke the tension.

“I think it’s getting late,” he said. “Perhaps we should…continue this discussion another day?”

“Yes, yes,” the others quickly agreed, wiping their sweat away. Chen Xing was so calm and composed that they all felt he could have easily settled in with a table and a fan and stretched the conversation into the next morning. They took the cue to make their escape, and Xie An saw them out.

Chen Xing shot Xie An a quick, subtle look to say that it was time to wrap things up, lest the guests come back to their senses and return to drag him into another debate that he couldn’t ward off so easily. Xie An returned the look and gestured for Chen Xing to follow him to the study.

Xiang Shu, when Chen Xing glanced at him, appeared indifferent. Chen Xing had expected some praise, and so he was rather disgruntled as he asked, “So what do you think?”

“I almost fell asleep listening to you,” Xiang Shu replied.

In the study, Xie An stared at Chen Xing, looking relieved. After a moment, he changed out of his day clothes, removing his robe and throwing his jade pendant aside. Now dressed in a simple tunic, without his shoes and socks, he plopped down on the couch, where he picked up a pot and took a swig directly from it.

“Idle chatter, idle chatter,” Xie An muttered. “All they do all day is engage in these damn philosophical debates. Useless!”

Chen Xing stared at him. Only then did Xie An notice that Chen Xing and Shulü Kong were both still hovering near the entrance of the study.

“What are you standing there for?” Xie An demanded. “Sit! What do you want for dinner? Should I have them roast a pig’s head and bring it over?”

Chen Xing hesitated. “Uh, I hope I haven’t caused any trouble for you, Minister Xie?”

“It’s Director of the Imperial Secretariat now,” Xie An lamented. “Xiaoshidi, you’re really not as foolish as you look. Forget it, let’s not talk about that. Tell me, what’s the situation? We have time now to discuss it properly.”

Chen Xing held his forehead. “Xie-daren, uh, I’ve thought it over carefully, and I don’t think you and I are actually fellow disciples.”

Xie An stood up. “Last time I returned to Mount Hua, after I’d become Baili-shifu’s disciple, I came back fully prepared. You see, I’ve spent the years searching high and low, and finally, well… The heavens reward hard work.”

As he spoke, Xie An turned around and pushed a bookshelf to the side to reveal a hidden compartment with a rack filled with treasures. There were precious swords, knives, jars, rings, jade pendants—everything a person could imagine. Chen Xing nearly fainted at the sight.

Xiang Shu furrowed his brow. “What’s this?”

“This is the collection of magical artifacts I painstakingly gathered after Baili-shifu instructed me to prepare for the exorcists’ great undertaking.”

Chen Xing was gobsmacked. He couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Xie An gestured him over. “Why don’t you come examine them, Shidi?”

“G…give me some time to collect myself.”

Xiang Shu walked up to the hidden compartment, picked up a halberd, and scrutinized it.

“Why didn’t you mention this earlier?!” Chen Xing finally managed. “What was all that nonsense with scholars and tea and philosophical debate? All it did was tire me out. Couldn’t you have just brought us straight to the study for a proper conversation?”

Xie An sighed. “You wouldn’t have known, but these days, in Jiankang, the aristocratic youth only play up to those with power. If I didn’t introduce you properly, how would anyone know your name? Look, after all this commotion today, you’re bound to receive a summons from His Majesty in a few days, and then your reputation will spread all on its own.”

“Xie-daren!” called a voice from outside. “Wang-daren has arrived.”

Xie An hurriedly draped his robe over himself, closed the cabinet, and straightened himself up until he was presentable again. “Come in,” he said. The visitor turned out to be Wang Xizhi. Xie An gave him a polite smile and a nod. “I was just having a chat with my xiaoshidi.”

Wang Xizhi, who was holding a letter, smiled back. “In a few days, it will be the Cold Food Festival. I’d like to invite young Tianchi and Xie-xiong to Mount Nanping for a spring hike. I wrote this invitation, then realized it would be impolite to send someone else to deliver it, so I thought I’d better come personally to show my sincerity.”

“Good, good,” Xie An said pleasantly.

Chen Xing hurriedly saw Wang Xizhi off, then closed the study door. Xie An removed his robe again and sat down on the couch.

“Where were we?” Xie An asked.

“You wear one face in public and another in private,” Xiang Shu observed. “Doesn’t that get tiring?”

“It does!” Xie An said in earnest. “But I have no choice. The imperial court is filled with civil and martial officials who know nothing but effete language without substance and how to look pretty. What else can I do?”

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” Chen Xing asked.

Xie An raised a hand and pointed to the north. “Fu Jian wants to cross the Yangtze River. Everyone’s feeling uneasy. What do you think?”

“Not so soon. He’s too busy with his own affairs right now to worry about that. But Xie-shixiong, you…” Chen Xing gave Xie An a look from top to bottom, then sat down beside him. “So it’s like this…”

Chen Xing recounted the events that had taken place in Chang’an and Chi Le Chuan. Xie An stayed silent as Chen Xing spoke, nodding. Once he’d heard everything, he sighed.

“I can’t believe I missed such a spectacle!”

“It’s a good thing you missed it, okay?!” Chen Xing exclaimed in frustration. “If this had happened in Jiankang, it would’ve been a disaster!”

Xie An pondered this, then seemed to come to a decision. “Staying in Jiankang isn’t a good stopgap. The day I received your letter, Xiaoshidi, I considered just cutting right through all the nonsense and being done with it. I’ll resign right now and follow you—”

“Stop! Don’t even think about it! Shixiong, you’re over forty! And even putting aside whether your body is up to fighting yao… I don’t know what Shifu told you, but silence has fallen on all magic, so it’s impossible to become an exorcist!”

“Will you let your shixiong see your Heart Lamp?” Xie An asked somberly.

Xiang Shu stared at him. Chen Xing did as he was told and lit up his Heart Lamp. Xie An stared at Chen Xing’s hand for a moment, then grasped his wrist.

“Xie-daren!” the steward outside called again. “A guest has arrived and wishes to pay you a visit.”

Chen Xing put away the Heart Lamp, and Xie An quickly adjusted his appearance. He opened the door and asked, “Who is it?”

The steward glanced at Chen Xing, then lowered his voice to speak quietly to Xie An.

With a gentle expression, Xie An said, “I have no money; please ask him to leave.” Once the steward had left, Xie An turned back to Chen Xing. “Let me take another look?”

Expressionlessly, Chen Xing lit up the Heart Lamp again to let Xie An study it as he pleased.

“So this is magic,” Xie An marveled. “This is magic that can move mountains, fill seas, and change the course of fate!”

“I would love to move mountains, fill seas, and change the course of fate,” Chen Xing said. “Why don’t you tell me, Shixiong, besides helping me find a drink of water when I get up in the middle of the night, what use does this Heart Lamp have?”

“It must have one. This is truly a miracle!”

“Enough already! Why don’t you come save the world from its demise and deal with Chiyou?! I don’t even want to be an exorcist! Why are

you so fixated on becoming one?”

Xie An pulled Chen Xing over to show him a shelf from his collection. “Take your time looking through these. See if any of them can be useful. With time, we can study them together.”

Chen Xing looked at the shelf laden with books and ornaments, most of which were useless antiques. There were one or two items that seemed like they might have been magical artifacts, but he couldn’t determine their age.

Then, suddenly, he noticed a bamboo scroll that was identical to one that had been missing from the Exorcism Department in the world of the Yin Yang Mirror. The way it was bound was exactly the same. Chen Xing unfolded the slip and saw the first column of words written on the left:

Exorcise and kill yao: Acala Blade.

Chapter 50

"THIS IS THE DIVINE WEAPON I'm the most eager to find," Xie An said. "The Acala Blade, the sword that exorcises yao and slays evil."

Chen Xing spread the bamboo slip over the table, and Xiang Shu turned around and scrutinized it. Xie An paced around the room.

"Legend says," Xie An continued, "that it was the ancient god, Acalanatha, who forged the sword. Using the six primordial lights of the world—sunlight, moonbeam, starlight, lightning flash, blaze of flame, and luster of bone—Acala cast the bronze collected from the Shou Mountain of the distant past into the Acala Blade."

Looking at the scroll, Chen Xing noticed that it recorded the same information Xie An had just provided. The writing was in the clerical style, and for some reason, the handwriting looked familiar. He looked up at Xiang Shu.

Xie An was still going. "According to what's written there, this sword can transform into six different forms. If injected with mana, it can slay the Demon God and purify demonic qi in the heavens and earth…"

"Wait." Chen Xing exchanged a glance with Xiang Shu, who gave him a slight nod. "Where did this record come from?" he asked Xie An.

Xie An thought for a moment. "From a household in Kuaiji. They found some antiques when they were relocating. I was offering a generous reward at that time, so somebody bought it for ten taels of silver and had it delivered to me."

Chen Xing frowned as he held onto the bamboo slip. “But logically speaking, this record should be hidden inside the Exorcism Department.”

“Correct,” Xie An said matter-of-factly. “I’m not sure why it showed up in Jiangnan, either.”

Xiang Shu carefully examined the bamboo slip. Unlike the one from the Exorcism Department in the mirror version of Chang’an, the words on this scroll were engraved. It seemed that the writer had transcribed a new copy and taken it out of the Exorcism Department, and somehow the copy had ended up in Jiangnan.

“Why does this handwriting seem familiar?” asked Chen Xing.

“It’s Zhang Liu’s,” said Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing realized then that he had gotten hold of a treasure. He turned the scroll over and over in his hands. It had been passed down by Zhang Liu three hundred years ago! But why would Zhang Liu have copied this record? The answer came to him when he connected the dots to the sword stored in the mirror world’s Exorcism Department. Zhang Liu had carried this bamboo slip on him; perhaps he had found this sword in Jiangnan and then later hid it inside the mirror world!

“At Mount Hua,” Xie An said, “Baili-shifu told me that the ‘demon’ would be resurrected. I thought that maybe a divine weapon that could be used against the enemy would be of some help, so after I returned I followed the clues and searched everywhere, but I never found any trace of it…”

Xiang Shu unsheathed the sword from his back, laid it flat on the table, and gestured to Xie An to take a look. Xie An, surprised, reached out for it at once, only to find that he couldn’t pick it up.

Nobody but Chen Xing and Xiang Shu could move the longsword. Not even Feng Qianjun had been able to pick it up. Chen Xing wondered what that meant. That the sword even recognized its owners?

"'The fetters of saṃsāra bind unyielding; may they be severed by the Sword of Wisdom,'" Xie An read. "This may really be it. Where did you get this?"

Chen Xing was filled with doubt. Zhang Liu's path, how the sword had found its way to the mirror world, the location of the Dinghai Pearl… There were so many mysteries, and each one gave way to more mysteries. When they pursued one, another always followed. Chen Xing gave Xie An a basic overview, and the three of them discussed the matter for a long time, but they couldn't come up with a theory that explained it all.

In the end, Xie An said, "Take a break for a few days, then you can go to Kuaiji to have a look. I'll have some people investigate the owner of the house this bamboo slip came from. It's best not to get your hopes up too high, though, given that the slip has been around for three hundred years."

Chen Xing struggled to make up his mind. Recalling the most important thing about their trip, he took out the two remaining maps that Xiang Shu had replicated and spread them out in front of Xie An.

"We found some clues from the Exorcism Department Headquarters in Chang'an," Chen Xing said. "One of the maps we found points to Carosha in the north, but we don't know the places on the other two maps. Xie-shixiong, can you take a look?"

Xie An took the two maps. When they were in Karakorum, Xiang Shu had asked his clan, but the only thing they were sure of was that the locations shown on the maps were not on that side of the pass. Chen Xing

believed that Xie An, who had traveled everywhere under the heavens when he was younger, crossing famous plains and visiting renowned mountains in search of traces of immortals, might have an idea. This was one of the key reasons he had come to Jiankang.

Xie An looked at the maps for a long time. “They’re not ringing any bells at the moment, but no matter. I’ll find a time to call over the disciples from all of the ethnic groups. They’ve visited lots of places too. I’m sure that if we discuss it with them, we’ll find results.”

Relieved, Chen Xing nodded.

Xie An told the both of them that they should rest first. Chen Xing asked Xie An for more advice and took the bamboo slip with him so that Xiang Shu could study it. There were many more techniques that could be used with the divine weapon. By learning more methods for wielding Xiang Shu’s heavy sword, they could get twice the result with half the effort when they next had to face the drought fiends.

With an inviting gesture, Xie An personally led Chen Xing and Xiang Shu to another courtyard. He arranged Xiang Shu’s lodgings first before bringing Chen Xing to a corridor leading to the east wing.

“This is too far,” Chen Xing protested. “You could have just arranged for the two of us to stay together.”

“No, no, that won’t do,” Xie An insisted. “The Great Exorcist and the Martial God are my guests. How could I neglect either of you like that?”

Xie An had arranged two of the best wings in his house for Chen Xing, who was equal parts amused and exasperated about the whole thing. He had no choice but to follow Xie An as he turned left and right, weaving

through the better part of the building to the other side of the Xie residence. Dusk approached, painting the sky gold and turning the spring breeze mild. The jingling of wind chimes in the corridor made Chen Xing feel relaxed and at ease.

Out of nowhere, Xie An asked, “Is Xiaoshidi perhaps betrothed?”

Chen Xing smiled. “Can Shixiong stop meddling in other people’s business?”

“I was just asking,” Xie An said hurriedly, “because when you were debating my Jiangdong disciples earlier today, I saw that adoring look in your protector’s eyes when he looked at you. If my good intentions ruined things, tell me right away. Or should I just arrange for the two of you to sleep in one room now?”

Chen Xing covered his forehead with his hand. “No, no, no, no. Just go now! Shoo!” He pushed Xie An forward, muttering, “What adoration? Taunting is more like it…”

“I may only be a few years older than you, but I do have some skill when it comes to reading people. Your protector, Shulü Kong, was staring at you unblinkingly from the beginning.”

“Then what you saw must have been his eyes becoming very sore,” Chen Xing retorted. “I did talk for almost two hours.”

Xie An accompanied Chen Xing to the east chamber, which wasn’t far from his own bedroom, then said, “I’m going to take care of some business now. I’ll talk to you again later in the evening.”

“That’s fine, I want to turn in early. You can come again tomorrow.”

It was already dark by the time Chen Xing sent Xie An away. The day had left him feeling drained, and he let out a long sigh. He wondered

what Xiang Shu was up to and thought about getting up to visit him, but in the end he was too lazy to move. Before long, dinner was delivered, and, after a perfunctory meal, Chen Xing drifted off to sleep.

Late the following morning, the housekeeper arrived to invite Chen Xing to breakfast. Xie An had already left to attend court, so Chen Xing and Xiang Shu found themselves alone, seated opposite each other in the dining hall. When Chen Xing lifted the lid of the food container, he saw a bowl of fish noodles accompanied by an array of delicate side dishes, all showcasing the exquisite flavors of Jiangnan.

"How did you sleep last night?" started Chen Xing.

"Not bad," Xiang Shu replied nonchalantly. Since the debate yesterday, Xiang Shu had been a touch more civil toward Chen Xing.

Your people bossed me around every single day in Chi Le Chuan, Chen Xing thought, *and not once did you intervene or speak up. Yesterday, I alienated all my people for your sake, and you didn't even acknowledge it. You know what, just forget it.*

"What about you?" Xiang Shu asked, for once returning the question.

"I'm okay," Chen Xing replied cheerfully. "I don't have to clean the room, after all. I can finally relax and enjoy myself."

Xiang Shu detected the mocking undercurrent in Chen Xing's words—he was talking about his entry into Chi Le Chuan. He had been treated like a mere servant and forced to serve the Great Chanyu daily. But as the old saying suggested, what goes around comes around. Today, the Great Chanyu himself had become the guest.

“We’ve been pretty idle lately,” Chen Xing added. “Why don’t we enjoy ourselves in Jiankang City? Let me introduce you to the culinary delights and fascinating attractions of the Han people.”

“No need; you can go by yourself,” said Xiang Shu. “Now that you’re home, you should spend more time with your shixiong and clansmen who write beautiful calligraphy. I’ve decided to become a hired enforcer and earn a bit of money.”

“Don’t mess around in Jiankang City. If the officers catch you, the amount of money you make won’t be enough to bail you out.”

“I’ll remember to cover my face. No need to worry.”

Chen Xing’s frustration reached its boiling point. “Hey! When I visited your home, you never really showed me around. Now that we’re at mine, I’ve been treating you politely, as any good host would treat a guest. Don’t you think you could be a little nicer, Xiang Shu?”

Xiang Shu feigned puzzlement. “I thought it was your shixiong who was hosting me?”

Chen Xing gritted his teeth. “What exactly have I done to offend you?”

“Laoye is back!”

Xie An had chosen that moment to return from court. The moment he walked in, he took off his official’s cap and tossed it aside, forcing the housekeeper to rush over and pick it up. He approached Chen Xing with a face brimming with happiness and asked warmly, “Shidi, have you eaten yet?”

With Xie An’s arrival, Xiang Shu fell silent once more.

Xie An turned to him. “Protector Shulü, if anything falls short of your expectations, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“You Han people’s portions are too small,” Xiang Shu replied. “They never quite cut it.”

“He was just trying to be accommodating! You didn’t need to actually complain!” Chen Xing cried.

“That’s fine,” Xie An interjected. “I’ll have someone slaughter a few lambs and bring them over straight away. We can roast them whole!”

Cheng Xing stared at him. The moment he stood up, Xie An tugged at him.

“Shidi, teach me how to cultivate so I can utilize the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth.”

This man was helpless! “The Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth is! No! More! That’s why we call it the Silence of All Magic! Shixiong, do you really want to study magic that much?”

“Start with the incantations and mind techniques. That way, when an opportunity comes, I can cultivate.”

Xie An hauled Chen Xing into his meditation chamber. What kind of high-ranking southern minister was so obsessed with becoming an exorcist?

Reflecting on the day’s events, Chen Xing realized his shifu had likely duped Xie An—accepted him as a disciple with some vague promise, subtly steered him toward the so-called right path, and then told him to go home. His shifu must have advised Xie An to buy himself some magical artifacts and encouraged independent practice, perhaps hoping that Xie An wouldn’t come back to Mount Hua to get in his way.

Seeing how enthusiastic Xie An was, Chen Xing decided to let it slide. “Okay, fine. I’ll teach you, Shixiong. We’ll begin with the five-element formula.”

The Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth may be gone, but the secret to meditating wasn’t. An exorcist practiced a myriad of meditation techniques, just as martial artists cultivated their meridians and internal breathing. Chen Xing whipped out some basic cultivation methods and told Xie An to meditate.

“You can’t get up or move for four hours,” he added. Then, to prevent Xie An from pestering him again, he left and went to argue with Xiang Shu.

When Chen Xing stepped out into the courtyard, he saw Xiang Shu seated with the bamboo slip unfurled across his knees. His face was illuminated by the brilliant spring sun, and his left hand carefully traced the meridians of his right arm. It seemed he was engrossed in studying the exorcist sword techniques. The sight of him, bathed in sunlight and incomparably handsome, was enough to dissipate Chen Xing’s anger.

“Without the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth,” Chen Xing said, “it won’t matter how peerless a divine weapon the Acala Blade is. It will still be useless.”

When he looked up and saw Chen Xing, Xiang Shu set the scroll aside. With a strange expression on his face, he asked, “How did it work before?”

“It worked because of the Heart Lamp,” Chen Xing explained wearily. “The mana you used was from my Heart Lamp. The last time,

when you grew anxious, you took all the mana from it—that's why I vomited blood."

Xiang Shu understood then. As the Protector, he couldn't vanquish yao or eliminate evil. The only way Xiang Shu could harness the mana necessary to wield the Acala Blade was when his exorcist created power by burning his heart meridian.

"Could I activate this divine weapon by using resentment?" Xiang Shu asked.

"It's best not to. I've always been wary of that because the power of resentment can backfire so easily. But if that Shi Hai guy has done a better job of mastering resentment than I anticipated, it would be catastrophic if he ended up taking advantage of the resentment *we* were using," Chen Xing said as Xiang Shu packed the scroll away. "You should wait and see. When the day comes—"

"What do you want me to do, if not use resentment?" Xiang Shu asked. It was an earnest question. "Can you point me to a clear path?"

This was a difficult situation. To safeguard Chen Xing, Xiang Shu needed to exploit the symbiotic connection between protectors and exorcists and draw mana from Chen Xing's Heart Lamp to wield the sword. If he extracted too much mana, however, he risked severely injuring or even killing Chen Xing.

"What else can you do?" Chen Xing asked, exasperated. "Use the sword when the time comes for you to use it. I'm just reminding you that you don't have to get so anxious when you're fighting."

Chen Xing remembered then: He only had three years of life left. If he was destined to die at the age of twenty, could that fate have been

ordained to pass on the day when Xiang Shu fought the decisive final battle against Shi Hai, or even Chiyou? Would he burn his entire life away with the Heart Lamp to support Xiang Shu? It was possible.

Xiang Shu gave him a strange look then, seeing a rare expression of grief cross Chen Xing's face. He saw Chen Xing's expression change multiple times in a few short moments before returning to normal.

"Ah," Chen Xing muttered to himself, "so that's how it is."

"What?" Xiang Shu asked, increasingly confused.

What else could it be? What other misfortune could befall him? Most accidents were preventable. All mortals were destined to die, and there were worse fates than to perish in such a meaningful way. Smiling again, Chen Xing turned to Xiang Shu. "I finally understand; everything is heaven's will. It's fine. Don't hesitate to use the Heart Lamp's power however you wish."

"Are you sick?" Xiang Shu asked.

Before Chen Xing could make up an excuse to reassure Xiang Shu, he heard the shouts of the Xie family's housekeeper as he rushed through the corridor.

"Laoye! Laoye! Bad news! The debt collector has come again!"

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu both raised their eyebrows. Chen Xing went to the door. "Your master is in seclusion," he explained. "Don't bother him. Let's see how you plan on explaining yourself if he fails because of you." The housekeeper pulled a face, but Chen Xing pointed outside. "There's still nearly four hours left. Why not just have the guest wait? Does the Xie family actually owe someone money? This family is so rich. How could they be in debt?"

“Xie Anshi!” rang a voice from outside. “Come out! I know you’re home! You even went to court today!”

Xiang Shu and Chen Xing whipped their heads back at the same time, shocked stiff.

It was Feng Qianjun, resplendent in an indigo brocade robe with jade pendants dangling from his temples. Two longswords were sheathed at his waist, and he was shod in cloud-embroidered boots. He strode into the Xie Residence, shouting, “Xie Anshi-daren! You agreed to pay back the money yesterday! Last night, you said you had guests, so I let it slide, but today… Tianchi? Xiang-xiong?!”

“Feng-dage!” Chen Xing rushed forward to leap into Feng Qianjun’s arms, embracing him tightly. Xiang Shu had intended to greet Feng Qianjun as well, but now he frowned, annoyed and a bit perturbed by this scene. He elected to ignore Feng Qianjun instead.

“Tianchi! Tianchi!” Feng Qianjun was overjoyed. “Why are you here? When did you arrive?”

Feng Qianjun grabbed onto Chen Xing and ruffled his hair, so pleased he looked like he was about to gobble him up. Chen Xing couldn’t suppress his laughter. Xiang Shu, on the other hand, nodded curtly, obviously not intending to catch up with Feng Qianjun, and turned to leave.

“Hey, Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing called out. “Don’t you want to chat for a bit?”

“I’m going to get married in a few days!” Feng Qianjun called to Xiang Shu’s back. “No need to get jealous, Xiang-xiongdi.”

Chen Xing turned to Feng Qianjun and made an exasperated hushing gesture. “What are you talking about?! Wait, why did you come here to

collect a debt?”

“It’s a long story,” Feng Qianjun replied. “We can talk about it when we go to my bank.”

Chen Xing informed Feng Qianjun that he was currently staying in the Xie residence, then dragged Feng Qianjun to one of Xie An’s unoccupied tea rooms. The housekeeper, noticing the debt collector being escorted away, quickly dispatched a servant to serve them tea. Thus, the two of them settled down to recount what had happened to them in their time apart.

“So that’s how it was,” Feng Qianjun said with a sigh and a nod of his head. He’d passed by Chi Le Chuan, but he’d only heard the rough gist of things.

Chen Xing felt a pang of guilt as he spoke of Xiao Shan. He had sent Xiao Shan to the Xiongnu tribe so that he could stay and grow up there, but he had made that decision without once considering what Xiao Shan himself wanted. After his heart-to-heart conversation with Xiang Shu on the ship that day, Chen Xing came to realize that everyone had their own aspirations in life and places they wished to visit before they were gone.

He had decided to write a letter to Xiao Shan informing him of their whereabouts in Jiangnan. He’d let Xiao Shan make his own choice this time and have someone bring him to them if that was what he wanted. But… what could he do about his own impending doom? Chen Xing was torn. He cared greatly for the child and was willing to take care of him until Xiao Shan didn’t need him anymore, but on some level, he was hesitant to form a

deeper bond for fear of the pain it would cause Xiao Shan when Chen Xing's time was finally up.

"Can you help me send a letter to Xiao Shan in Chi Le Chuan?" Chen Xing asked. He recalled that the Xifeng Bank dabbled in the information trade; Feng Qianjun probably knew all sorts of things. "You must've already heard about some of the things that happened."

"There are still some things that I don't understand," Feng Qianjun said. "But I do know that Xiang Shu-xiongdi resigned from his position as the Great Chanyu and left Chi Le Chuan with you a long time ago."

"What?" Chen Xing nearly knocked over the tea bowl in his shock. "Resigned from being the Great Chanyu?"

"Yeah. He didn't tell you?" It was Feng Qianjun's turn to be surprised. "Everyone knew about it overnight—beyond and within the Great Wall, in the Central Plains, Jiangnan, and other places too."

"When did this happen?" Chen Xing asked blankly.

Feng Qianjun told him the approximate date. It was during their time in Karakorum. Xiang Shu had already decided then that he would no longer be the Great Chanyu?

Feng Qianjun was still speaking. "The information I received was that Shulü Kong surrendered the Sixteen Hu's jade tallies to the Tiele chief. He then expressed his intention to resign by unsheathing his sword, returning his bow, sealing the strings, and making a sacrifice to the heavens. He even played the ancient Qiang flute melody. The Tiele chief, Shi Mokun, has succeeded him on the throne of the Great Chanyu. Fu Jian has already dispatched a letter to Karakorum, requesting the Ancient Covenant

to expedite the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment ceremony and prepare to mobilize troops for a southern invasion."

Chen Xing's mind went blank. He sat there at a loss for words, struggling to process this information. "Why did he resign?" he asked finally.

This made Feng Qianjun even more incredulous. "Isn't he your protector now? It's only natural that he would resign from being the Great Chanyu."

"No, no… Xiang Shu!"

Chen Xing got to his feet and was on his way out of the room just as Xiang Shu was coming in. They nearly crashed into each other. Xiang Shu had a cold expression on his face, and he shot Feng Qianjun a reproachful glare. Who did Feng Qianjun think he was?

Feng Qianjun, of course, had known that Xiang Shu did not want to tell Chen Xing about this. He smiled to himself.

Chapter 51

"WHY DID YOU resign from being the Great Chanyu?" Chen Xing asked.

"I didn't want to do it anymore," Xiang Shu replied icily. "What? Am I not allowed to make that decision on my own?" He knelt in front of the table and glanced at the tea bowl. Chen Xing had already drunk from it, but he didn't care. He picked it up and took a drink.

Feng Qianjun smiled. "Congratulations, Xiang-xiongdi."

"Congratulations to you too," Xiang Shu replied, sounding indifferent.

Chen Xing didn't understand what Feng Qianjun was congratulating Xiang Shu over, and he understood Xiang Shu's response even less. The only ones who understood this exchange were Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun themselves: Feng Qianjun was congratulating Xiang Shu for ridding himself of his burden and finally being able to do his own thing. Xiang Shu was "congratulating" Feng Qianjun on getting married so that he could finally stop following Chen Xing around and acting weirdly close with him.

For once, Xiang Shu took it upon himself to ask a question first. "Did you find anything in your investigation?"

Before Feng Qianjun could give his report, Chen Xing interrupted them. "What will we do if Shi Mokun agrees to hand over the Purple Scroll of Golden Conferment?"

"I don't think he will just yet," Feng Qianjun said.

Xiang Shu shrugged. “I can’t tell him what to do. He’s the new Great Chanyu, not my servant.”

“Fu Jian is going to mobilize his troops to cross the Yangtze River,” Chen Xing murmured.

“How is that any of your business?”

“How…is that not my business?”

“You were the one going on and on about how you wanted me to go back and be the Great Chanyu!” Xiang Shu shouted. “Now I’m no longer the Great Chanyu! Happy?!”

Feng Qianjun sighed. “Why do you two never change? You’re always arguing.”

Deep inside, Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu’s resignation would only make the situation in the north more dangerous, because now, Fu Jian could basically move around unchecked. Xiang Shu, meanwhile, had thought Chen Xing would be moved by this gesture—that he hadn’t hesitated to resign from his position as the Great Chanyu in order to head south with Chen Xing. Xiang Shu couldn’t suppress the anger that swelled up in him over Chen Xing’s actual response. “Oh, I forgot,” he scoffed. “If I resign, the Hu will bully your people again. That wouldn’t be too good for them, now would it? Oh no, I’m worried sick!”

Chen Xing heard the sarcasm in Xiang Shu’s words, but he didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, he replied, “When a Hu dies, does that not count as another life lost? If they really do fight, who knows how many people will die? This resentment…”

Xiang Shu finally snapped. “Then I’ll just head to Chang’an now and kill Fu Jian, all right?!” Both Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun were startled,

and Chen Xing shut his mouth. Xiang Shu turned to Feng Qianjun next. “Speak. My current role is the Exorcism Department’s Protector Martial God, so what were the results of your investigation?”

Feng Qianjun chuckled. Xiang Shu wasn’t wrong; if Feng Qianjun considered himself an exorcist, then Xiang Shu and Chen Xing were theoretically his superiors. “The situation doesn’t look too good,” he said, gesturing for Chen Xing to sit down and stop fighting.

Chen Xing sat, his heart a tangled mess of emotions. As he started listening, he realized something. *Did you have a change of heart? I’m in charge of the Exorcism Department, so why are you the one giving out orders?! Oh, forget it for now… I’ll settle things with you after Feng Qianjun leaves.*

“After I said goodbye to the two of you, I headed east and crossed through the Hangu Pass,” Feng Qianjun reported. “It was then that I bumped into Murong Chong on his way to Luoyang.”

Feng Qianjun had left quietly that night. He’d intended to return to Jiangnan but had bumped into Murong Chong along the way. Fu Jian had issued a decree across the land that scapegoated the Feng family for the perplexing case on his hands. But Murong Chong had known who the real culprit was for a long time. It would have been impossible for him not to have known about his sister’s attempt at vengeance.

After the funeral, in an attempt to show him some compassion, Fu Jian transferred Murong Chong eastward from Pingyan to Luoyang. He’d been planning to bestow a new fief on him once some time had passed, and perhaps he even thought of giving Murong Chong the new title of Prince of Henan—but the turmoil in the court put those ideas on hold. When Murong

Chong and Feng Qianjun had crossed paths, Murong Chong was leading his troops, and Feng Qianjun followed them for the rest of the way. He learned all sorts of news in the process, and the first thing he learned was that in the space of a single night, Princess Qinghe's body had been dug up and spirited away.

Chen Xing felt a frisson of foreboding. A complicated look came over Xiang Shu's face. Feng Qianjun nodded. "It may have been taken to be transformed into…one of those things," he said.

Princess Qinghe had always lingered in Feng Qianjun's mind; it had been love at first sight for him. Now, after everything that had happened, his only wish was for her to rest in peace.

After Feng Qianjun arrived in Luoyang, he went to the city's outskirts to find the tomb of the Prince of Runan, Sima Liang. Just as he expected, the coffin was empty; Sima Liang's body had already been removed. This was consistent with what Chen Xing had learned from Sima Wei: that six of the eight princes had already been resurrected.

The eight princes were the Prince of Runan, Sima Liang; the Prince of Chu, Sima Wei; the Prince of Zhao, Sima Lun; the Prince of Qi, Sima Xi; the Prince of Changsha, Sima Yao; the Prince of Chengdu, Sima Ying; the Prince of Hejian, Sima Yong; and the Prince of Donghai, Sima Yue. It was unclear which two princes had yet to be resurrected.

Xiang Shu felt dizzy hearing all of this. He couldn't keep all the members of this giant Sima family straight. Of course, this was no problem for Chen Xing, since these were all Han names. By contrast, names like Chi Le Chuan's Shi Mokun, Barkol, Che Luofeng, and Carosha gave him a headache.

“The Prince of Zhao, Sima Lun, you guys already purged in Chang’an,” Feng Qianjun said. “The Prince of Donghai, Sima Yue, was chopped into pieces by that little fellow I haven’t met yet.”

“He was chopped into meat paste,” Chen Xing confirmed.

“Sima Wei is currently trying to find a way to break free of Shi Hai’s control,” Feng Qianjun said thoughtfully. “I’m sure we’ll meet him again at some point. That means that of the six revived princes, three have already been taken out of the equation, and three are still lurking in the dark.”

Chen Xing frowned. “That means Shi Hai’s drought fiend princes, who were supposed to guard the array, have already scattered. It’s hard to say whether he will still be able to use the Ten Thousand Spirits Arrays to resurrect Chiyou.”

Xiang Shu’s anger had died down by this point. “The last two princes must be found as soon as possible so that we can deal with them ahead of time,” he said. “But we don’t know where they’re buried.”

“Heh.” Feng Qianjun smiled proudly, showing neat white teeth. “This is precisely my area of expertise.”

“You’ve found them already?” Chen Xing asked, surprised.

“Have you ever thought about why these two princes are the only ones Shi Hai hasn’t revived yet? The reason is simple: These two might be too far away for him to revive them easily.”

“Wait…” Chen Xing had a vague grasp on what Feng Qianjun was implying. Shi Hai’s identity had always been shrouded in fog, and now the slightest hint was poking out. This was a very important clue indeed.

Xiang Shu, on the other hand, had immediately understood. “They’re buried in the south.”

Feng Qianjun nodded meaningfully. “They’re buried just north of Mount Zhong, in the imperial mausoleum there.”

The War of the Eight Princes had brought calamity to the Great Jin Dynasty. Each and every one of the eight princes of the Sima household had been an expert in military arts and a seasoned general. Nevertheless, thanks to the provocations and manipulations of the crafty empress Jia Nanchong, a wild, bloody war between brothers was launched over the title of Emperor. They spent a good few decades slaughtering one another, and the Great Jin’s armies, millions of troops strong, collapsed under this internal friction. The northern garrisons quickly emptied, and the Xiongnu Liu Yan took advantage of that to lead his own army through the pass. The final winner of the massacre, Sima Yue, led the Chang’an court as well as the majority of his army. Panicked civilians fled, only to be intercepted by Liu Yan and annihilated. The Jin royal family led their people in the Southern Crossing of the Intellectuals, and the event later became known as the Yongjia Rebellion.

The Yongjia Rebellion also marked the beginning of all kinds of Hu uprisings, which lasted for nearly a hundred years. The heir to the Sima family, who had finally settled in Jiankang, did not remain idle while the northern tribes were fighting over Guanzhong, Luoyang, and the other regions there. During these times of war, he leveraged his formidable skill in forging alliances left and right, up and down. As a result, he succeeded not only in inciting disharmony among the tribes and turning them against each other, but also in retrieving the country’s imperial jade seal, as well as the coffins of the Prince of Hejian and the Prince of Qi. Their bodies were ultimately entombed in the imperial mausoleum on Mount Zhong.

“That’s great,” said Chen Xing. “That’s really great! Wait, wait… Hmm. Based on what we saw back on Longzhong Mountain, it takes about fifty days to revive an ancient corpse and turn it into a drought fiend king. The process must be very complicated. We may not actually need to worry about destroying the corpses outright…”

“Clever!” Feng Qianjun exclaimed. “I’ve already dispatched some spies to keep an eye on the imperial mausoleum day and night. If anything odd happens, we’ll be notified right away. At the beginning, I was a little hesitant, because if Shi Hai wants to revive these two princes, he’ll send his men or even come himself at some point. Wouldn’t it be more straightforward to just destroy the princes’ corpses in advance? But when you told us what Sima Wei had told you, I thought we might be able to lay a trap.”

Chen Xing hummed as a daring idea came to him. When that strange masked man resurrected Sima Wei on Longzhong Mountain, something had gone differently, and it seemed to be because the Heart Lamp had been nearby. Was it possible they could use that to their advantage? Could they make the remaining two princes rebel and catch Shi Hai unawares?

“Anyway, at least for now,” Feng Qianjun said, “Shi Hai still hasn’t gone to Zhongshan to try to quickly resurrect the two princes. That implies something profound.”

Xiang Shu made a sound of agreement, but Chen Xing was lost. “What’s the profound meaning?”

Xiang Shu folded his arms and waited. After a while, though, he seemed to grow impatient. “Feng Qianjun *just* praised you for being clever. Why are you being stupid again? Isn’t it obvious why Shi Hai has to let the

two princes be?” Feng Qianjun just smiled, and Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing, who was still thinking this through. “Because Shi Hai’s domain doesn’t extend south of the Yangtze River!”

Oh! It all made perfect sense. Longzhong Mountain was very close to Xiangyang, so when the Qin army was besieging Xiangyang, the mysterious masked man had invaded Longzhong Mountain. The scope of Shi Hai’s activity so far had been limited to the regions north of the Yangtze River. He couldn’t cross the river!

What did that imply? It meant that Shi Hai was someone close to Fu Jian! Now that Chen Xing thought back on the drought fiend chaos in Chang’an, he recalled that an unexpected turn of events had returned the Yin Yang Mirror to Feng Qianyi’s hand midway through… The situation was gradually growing clearer.

“So Shi Hai is currently masquerading as someone who is close to Fu Jian,” Chen Xing said. “Who could it be?!”

This was the same question that Feng Qianjun wanted to answer at all costs: the truth of Shi Hai’s identity. He wanted to find the person who had lured in his elder brother and turned him into a devil. Shi Hai was his number one target for revenge.

Chen Xing sighed. Sure enough, they’d needed teamwork for this. He hadn’t been able to make heads or tails of this conspiracy, but when the three of them put their heads together, the details had slowly surfaced and become clear!

“Other than Fu Jian, who else entered the palace that night?” Feng Qianjun asked. “The Murongs? Tuoba Yan?”

“It’s not Tuoba Yan,” Xiang Shu said flatly. “Much as I don’t like him, it can’t be him. It was a dark night, too dark for anything to be seen clearly. I only caught sight of Fu Jian and a few of his personal bodyguards. There is always the possibility that it’s Fu Jian himself.”

“That is a possibility we should not rule out,” said Feng Qianjun.

Chen Xing thought for a moment. “Let’s set aside the question of whether or not Fu Jian would be motivated to do such a thing. Do you think an emperor has the time to run around and put on an act like that?”

“Oh, fair point,” Feng Qianjun conceded.

“Wang Ziye?” Xiang Shu offered. “Fu Jian always seeks him out to discuss things.”

“Did you see him, though?” Feng Qianjun asked.

Xiang Shu thought back to that night, but he couldn’t remember whether Wang Ziye had been there behind Fu Jian.

The three of them kept talking, discussing a variety of possibilities, but in the end, Xiang Shu said, “Depending on what happens after this, we may be able to determine who it is.”

Chen Xing, whose train of thought continued to lag slightly behind Xiang Shu’s, had no choice but to humbly ask, “Why? Can you explain it more clearly? Protector, you’re very clever.”

“How could I possibly live up to such high praise? Compared to the exorcist who talked circles around everyone during light intellectual conversation and fought a group of scholars with only his words, this protector’s small tricks are trite. How could I ever compare?”

Chen Xing had come to sincerely admire Xiang Shu well before this conversation. He also really hadn't understood what had just been said. But Xiang Shu's response had needled him. "A wise person who reflects on his actions a thousand times will always overlook something," he replied, pointedly but politely; "an idiot who reflects on his actions a thousand times will make some gain. There's no shame in asking questions once in a while."

Xiang Shu frowned.

Feng Qianjun saw that the two of them were starting to provoke each other again and feared that it would turn into another quarrel. "Xiang-xiongdi," he interrupted hastily, "please, enlighten us."

"To resurrect the remaining two princes," Xiang Shu said, mollified, "you would need a large amount of resentment released by the dead, like with the war in Xiangyang. In order for that many people to die, a great battle would have to take place. If Fu Jian heads south in the near future to attack Jiangkang, then that will prove that someone by his side is pushing him to incite war. In that case, we could conclude that Shi Hai's identity is that of a high-ranking advisor."

"Ah." Feng Qianjun actually hadn't thought about this. He nodded.

Chen Xing was right: Xiang Shu really was clever. Today, they'd been reunited with Feng Qianjun, but the happiest thing that had come out of it was not the unexpected meeting with an old friend but rather their shift from passive behavior into action. Once they located Shi Hai's hiding place, it would give them a clear goal, which would make it easier to plan.

The scariest thing was not knowing the enemy's location or, worse, who the enemy was. They had come a long way and paid a great price, but

their sacrifices had finally paid off. This allowed Chen Xing to breathe a sigh of relief, at least for the time being.

But Feng Qianjun was still frowning. Before Chen Xing could ask for more information, Feng Qianjun said, “If you want dead people, it’s not always necessary to start a war. The Jiangnan region may look peaceful, but in fact, there are darker forces at work here. It’s interesting that you’ve returned to Jiangnan at such a time. Truly, the mandate of heaven works in mysterious ways.”

Xiang Shu’s expression suddenly changed. Chen Xing, who had been about to get up to shake out his arms and legs, heard Feng Qianjun’s words and said, “What? What’s the matter?”

Feng Qianjun hesitated for a moment, then explained. “This is speculation, but…since we’re all involved anyway, I might as well say it now. Do you remember that soldier’s body we found on Longzhong Mountain a year ago?”

Chen Xing was taken aback. That had been back when he, Xiang Shu, and Feng Qianjun had first met. Xiang Shu had kicked a corpse off the cliff as a warning to stop them from moving forward. That night, Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun had tied the corpse onto their horse’s back and sent the horse back to Mai City with it.

“The corpse transformed?” Xiang Shu asked, his voice turning serious.

Feng Qianjun nodded. “Fortunately, the situation isn’t too bad yet…”

In less than twenty-four hours after it had been delivered to Mai City, that dead soldier’s body had turned into a living corpse. The knowledgeable magistrate of Mai City, associating it with folklore about the “rebellion of

the jiangshi" of which an ancient record spoke, immediately had the corpse locked up in a big cage. However, the coroner who inspected the corpse was scratched in the process, as were several soldiers.

The locked-up living corpse was sent to Jiankang and presented to the Jin Emperor, Sima Yao, in secret, so as not to alarm the masses. But not even ten days after the coroner returned home, he became infected, fell ill, and bit his wife and child. Following that, more people were turned into living corpses.

Chen Xing could see where this was going.

"We didn't know at the time how formidable the drought fiend army was," said Feng Qianjun. "We shouldn't blame ourselves."

Xiang Shu's face had turned ashen. "What happened next?"

"Many people in Mai City were infected with corpse poison. Fortunately, later on… Uh, it's not pretty, but the issue was resolved."

His understatement spoke volumes. Chen Xing sighed, and Xiang Shu asked, "Has it truly been resolved?"

"On the surface," Feng Qianjun said. "Last year, in late autumn, when you were in Chi Le Chuan, several small-scale plague outbreaks occurred across Jiankang, Moling, Kuaiji, Wujun, and some other places. They're still spreading across the region to this day."

Chen Xing frowned and said nothing. Feng Qianjun described the plague: The disease's origin was inexplicable, and it came without warning. Some said it was brought back by the Jin army who had been sent on a mission to Mai City, while others thought it was an ordinary plague. The strange thing was the epidemic wasn't particularly lethal. The majority of

the infected kept their lives, but the initial infection was followed by signs of prolonged sleepiness.

“Is there a cure?” Chen Xing asked.

Feng Qianjun hadn’t actually witnessed the plague with his own eyes, having been investigating the imperial mausoleums in Luoyang, Pingyang, and Youzhou at the time. “I heard that some people have made full recoveries,” he said. “It’s said that the infected slowly get better if they bask in the sun.”

Xiang Shu thought for a moment. “Just because they can recover doesn’t mean they will be all right.”

Feng Qianjun had gone out of his way to visit people who had recovered completely. They behaved the same as they had before they were infected and showed zero indication of turning into living corpses, so he decided to wait and observe. As it turned out, this plague was akin to consumption; its victims didn’t get better, but they didn’t drop dead either. It was also still slowly spreading through many cities south of the Yangtze River.

“Then things aren’t okay after all. We need to take a look at the patients as soon as possible,” Chen Xing said, though he still didn’t know what to do.

“This leads to another problem,” said Feng Qianjun.

“There’s more?!” Chen Xing threw up his hands. “Can’t you just say everything at once?!”

“This matter has nothing to do with Shi Hai, Chiyou, or exorcist business,” Feng Qianjun clarified quickly. “It’s Xie-daren, Xie Anshi’s—”

“Laoye! Laoye!” shouted the housekeeper from the next room. “Someone, help!”

This greatly alarmed all three of them. They’d just been talking about a plague, and now the sound of someone falling down had come from the next room over! Xiang Shu got up and rushed out, and Chen Xing lit the Heart Lamp and followed suit.

But when they reached the next room, they just found Xie An hobbling to the couch. “It’s okay, I just meditated for too long and got leg cramps.”

Everyone stared at him.

“Xie-daren.” Feng Qianjun bowed, his hands clasped in front of him. “Isn’t it about time you returned the money?”

“What all of you were talking about.” Xie An tugged at his lapel, then knelt to grope around for his shoes. “I overheard everything. As for this issue with the money, may I ask Young Master Feng to grant me just a few more days? I’m so old, you see, I can’t stand the shock…”

Chen Xing was confused. He glanced at Feng Qianjun and then back at Xie An. “What? Are you sure it’s not the other way around? Shixiong, you owe Feng-dage money? How much?”

“He’s your shixiong?” Feng Qianjun asked, perplexed. “Isn’t your shixiong Wang Meng? Since when was it Xie An?”

Xie An dismissed his housekeeper, then turned back to Feng Qianjun. “It’s like this. You and my shidi are familiar with each other, which means everyone is on the same side. How about we write off the money for now?”

“On the same side, my ass!” Feng Qianjun shouted. “We had an agreement! We lent you seven hundred thousand silver taels to support the

Beifu Army. The legal documents were written up, and they stipulated that all debts were to be paid off by the beginning of this spring. I don’t need the hundred-thousand-tael interest, but Xie-daren, please take pity on our pathetic Xifeng Bank. Our Chang’an property has been wiped out, and there are still many places in Jiankang that need money. What do you expect me to do?”

“Calm down, calm down,” Chen Xing said placatingly. “Everyone, look at me. No need to quarrel; there will always be more money.”

“That’s right.” Xiang Shu nodded in approval. “Chen Xing will stand on the road outside later, and the money will come on its own.”

Chapter 52

"IT HAS NOTHING to do with you!" Chen Xing said. "Stop causing trouble!"

Xie An had only wanted to invite Feng Qianjun for tea, but Feng Qianjun insisted on getting back the seven hundred thousand taels of silver that he was owed no matter what.

Xifeng and Dongzhe were the two largest banks in the world. The previous year, after Feng Qianyi's fall into madness and all the trouble it caused for Chang'an, Xifeng's treasury was seized by Fu Jian. Over a million taels of silver had been taken to fill the Qin empire's coffers. The entire court, both civil and military, happily counted the money, and Fu Jian, having obtained this vast sum, now had the funds for his military and was once again becoming restless.

But the Feng family was devastated. They'd returned to Jiangnan to recover and rebuild their fortunes. Then Feng Qianjun learned that a year earlier, Xie An had borrowed seven hundred thousand taels of silver from the Xifeng Bank to support his Beifu army, which had been established to resist Fu Jian's Qin army and was under Xie An's command.

The Great Jin's national treasury had been in deficit for years, but they dared not increase taxes for fear of uprisings among the aristocratic families. Sima Yao had told Xie An that the Great Jin could no longer afford to support the army and asked him to cut the military. But how could Xie An cut the military? After mulling over it, he resorted to borrowing seven hundred thousand taels of silver in a high-interest loan from Xifeng Bank's Feng Qianyi, with whom the Xie family was on good terms, in the

name of the royal family. He signed a written agreement to repay it within a year, with an additional hundred thousand taels to be paid on top.

The Feng family's operations in Chang'an had often relied on support from Jiangnan, so Xie An figured it wouldn't actually be down to him to repay the debt in the end. If Xifeng Bank did come knocking, he'd just use the national cause as justification to brush them off. The Feng family were respectable people; they wouldn't resort to badgering him over something that was in the nation's interest.

But then Feng Qianyi went astray and vanished, just like that. After the Feng family's business in Chang'an collapsed, they'd tried to return to Jiangnan—but now, the Dongzhe Bank, which had ties with the Wang family, was watching them like a hawk. It was a matter of life and death. And over the past six months, Feng Qianjun had given out a considerable number of interest-free loans to aid victims of the disaster. Now, Xifeng Bank's reserves had dropped to below a hundred thousand taels.

Feng Qianjun had no choice: If he wanted to preserve the family business, he had to recover this money. With such a vast intelligence network—thousands of families, merchants, and bodyguards scattered across the land, and all of them waiting to put food on their tables—what else could he do?

"Have some tea, please have some tea first. You must be thirsty…"

"I'm not thirsty, Xie-daren. I want the money," Feng Qianjun said patiently.

"Xiaoshidi, why don't you help calm Feng-shaozhu down for me?"

"Xie-daren," Feng Qianjun said, "why don't we set a date, and I'll bring people over to start moving things out."

“Feng-dage, let’s talk this through,” Chen Xing said hurriedly. “No need to get upset.”

“Shidi, did you bring any magical artifacts?” Xie An asked. “Perhaps we could use one to temporarily appease Feng-shaozhu?”

“I did not!” Chen Xing snapped. “Xie-shixiong, I’m already trying to help smooth things over for you, and now you’re eyeing my magical artifacts?”

“What would I need magical artifacts for?” Feng Qianjun retorted. “If I wanted something from Chen Xing, I’d ask him directly. I’m closer with him than you are! Enough nonsense, Xie-daren. You really need to pay up this time.”

“Ah! Xiaoshidi, do you know how to perform the legendary ‘turning stones into gold’ spell?”

“No!” Chen Xing barked. “There’s no such spell!”

“I’ll fetch the money right away,” Xie An said. “Please wait a moment. Have a seat. I, Anshi, always keep my word.”

Feng Qianjun, who had consumed more than enough tea at the Xie residence that day, simply stood outside the hall and replied, “Fine, I’ll wait.”

Xie An’s house and his collections of calligraphy and paintings were likely worth a decent sum, but seven hundred thousand taels of silver was no small amount. Given that Xie An didn’t live with the rest of the Xie family, it was unclear if he could actually cover the debt.

Feng Qianjun turned and asked, “Where’s Xiang Shu?” Xiang Shu, who had been listening to their argument with growing irritation, had walked off.

Chen Xing studied Feng Qianjun intently, then broke into a sudden smile. “Feng-dage, it’s been a long time since we last met. You seem… different.”

Feng Qianjun looked himself over, a bit surprised. “Different? How so?”

Chen Xing continued scrutinizing Feng Qianjun. Something about him had indeed changed, though Chen Xing couldn’t quite put his finger on it. Perhaps it was the faint trace of mischief in his expression, which added a subtle edge to his demeanor. Or could it have been the lingering influence of the Saber of Harmony and Life, fueled by resentment, that had altered him ever so slightly?

“Have you used the Saber of Harmony and Life recently?” said Chen Xing.

“Twice. When I was trying to shake off Murong Chong’s scouts, near a graveyard. But don’t worry, I didn’t harm anyone.”

After a brief, thoughtful pause, Chen Xing asked, “Would you mind if I examined you?”

Feng Qianjun spread his arms wide in a gesture of casual compliance. Chen Xing summoned his Heart Lamp and stepped closer to Feng Qianjun, who began to loosen his robes.

“There’s no need to take off your clothes,” Chen Xing said, pressing a hand against Feng Qianjun’s chest. “Keep your belt on.” Feng Qianjun’s hands stilled.

Chen Xing channeled his Heart Lamp into Feng Qianjun’s meridians, examining his inner state. He discovered that Feng Qianjun’s core remained intact—a faint, familiar light still flickered within, keeping his true self

grounded. There didn’t seem to be any major issues, but the flow of the Heart Lamp’s power through his body was sluggish and obstructed, as though another force within him was resisting its influence.

“No significant problems,” Chen Xing concluded, “but try to use it sparingly. Resentment energy isn’t like spiritual energy. It’ll harm your body over time and gradually make you become more wicked…”

Just then, Xiang Shu returned and stood in the doorway, watching Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun. It seemed he had merely gone back to his room to fetch something. Chen Xing fell silent, and Feng Qianjun promptly tightened his belt and put his outer robe back on. Xiang Shu glanced between the two of them.

“I was just checking the resentment in his body!” Chen Xing explained hastily.

“I didn’t say anything,” Xiang Shu replied. “But Xie An has run off. Are you two sure you still want to wait here?”

Feng Qianjun froze in alarm. “What?”

Xiang Shu gestured apathetically in the direction of the imperial palace. Feng Qianjun strode quickly outside to find that Xie An had actually left and gone into hiding somewhere within the palace itself. There was nothing Feng Qianjun could do now.

Chen Xing tried to console him. “Maybe he’s gone to ask the emperor for funds?”

Feng Qianjun rubbed his forehead in exasperation. “The emperor? That dog can’t even feed himself. He’s so stressed his hair is falling out. How’s he going to find my money? If the sun rises in the west, maybe!”

“Uh, Feng-dage,” Chen Xing said as he escorted Feng Qianjun out of Xie An’s residence, “I suggest not pushing them too hard. If they’re cornered, the emperor and Xie An might—”

“I’m already cornered myself,” Feng Qianjun interrupted, frustrated. “Forget the money we’ve lent out—at this rate, Xifeng will have to close its doors within three months. No, Chen Xing, you’ve got to help me think of something!”

“Hey! Why am I being dragged into this? I was just here to help Xie-shixiong see you off!”

Just minutes before, the three of them had been engaged in a heartfelt reunion, but as soon as the subject of money came up, Feng Qianjun turned serious. “If Xifeng Bank goes under, no one will be left to watch over the imperial mausoleum for you,” he said grimly. “The information from the north? Gone. Then you and Xiang-xiongdi will have to stake out the mausoleum yourselves. Wouldn’t that be a hassle?”

“The problem is, I don’t have any money either!” Chen Xing said. “We’re barely getting by as it is. If I had seven hundred thousand taels, do you think I’d be relying on Xie An? For that matter, I still *owe* him three thousand taels! If it weren’t for him supporting me and my master back in the day, I wouldn’t even be acknowledging him as my shixiong…”

Seeing no way forward, Feng Qianjun turned to Xiang Shu. “Xiang-xiongdi, am I mistaken, or weren’t you once the Great Chanyu of the vast northern plains?” he said earnestly, clearly hoping for a lifeline.

“Feng-dage,” Chen Xing cut in expressionlessly, “does Xiang Shu *look* like he has money? I’ve been to his home. If you sold everything in his

tent for silver, it wouldn't even be enough to cover the three thousand taels I owe Xie An!"

Xiang Shu cooperatively patted himself down, then spread his hands wide to show he had nothing to offer. "Go stand by the road for a while?" Xiang Shu suggested to Chen Xing. "Maybe Tuoba Yan will show up again."

You're still harping on that? Chen Xing thought. Feng Qianjun, who didn't know what they were talking about, shot Chen Xing a puzzled look. Chen Xing decided to just go along with it. "Fine, I'll give it a try. Sui Xing, Sui Xing, how about sending some money my way?"

And so the three of them just stood there by the road. Xiang Shu lowered his head slightly to look at Chen Xing, but he didn't speak. A few swallows flew past outside Wuyi Alley. Everything was quiet.

"This place is too empty," Xiang Shu said. "Let's walk out?"

Chen Xing sighed and walked a little way until he reached the main road outside the alley. The eastern street of Jiankang was bustling with people, and the market was crowded.

"Do you think money will just fall from the sky?" Feng Qianjun asked, bewildered. "Should we look for somewhere less crowded, then? Otherwise, it'll all be snatched up."

"Walk a bit more?" Xiang Shu suggested, gesturing for Chen Xing to keep going.

"What are you up to now?" Chen Xing asked, but he walked a few more steps. Ahead, he saw a grand three-story shop, brilliantly decorated in gold and jade. At the entrance stood a white jade pillar upon which two

words were inscribed: *Dongzhe United*. They had arrived at the home base of Feng Qianjun's sworn enemy.

"This is your enemy's bank, isn't it?" said Chen Xing. "Where's yours?"

Feng Qianjun pointed to the west side of the market, where there stood another large bank with a black wooden railing: *Xifeng United*.

"Forget it," Feng Qianjun said. "Come to my place for dinner tonight? We can drink, and I'll introduce you to my fiancée."

But Xiang Shu was looking up at the Dongzhe Bank sign, deep in thought.

"You're not thinking of robbing the bank again, are you?" Chen Xing asked.

"You owe Xie An three thousand taels of silver," Xiang Shu said, "If you ask, I'll pay it off for you, but you have to promise me one thing."

Chen Xing almost protested that this place wasn't like Mai City; if Xiang Shu tried to rob a bank here, he'd get arrested for sure! But then he remembered the time when Xiang Shu made him gamble on saving Che Luofeng, so he said, "All right, sure. But in addition to paying off my debt to Xie An, you have to help Feng-dage get through his crisis."

"Hey," Feng Qianjun said, laughing. He'd intended to keep the mood light, but then, thinking it over, he adopted a more serious tone. "Chen Xing, I appreciate the kind offer, but you don't need to force him to try to do what he can't."

As expected, Xiang Shu looked annoyed. "Fine, I'll do it."

“Go ahead, then, but you can’t rob the bank,” Chen Xing said reluctantly, settling in to watch Xiang Shu make a fool of himself. There was no way Xiang Shu had the funds; otherwise, why would he have needed to rob a bank back in Mai City? Besides, it wasn’t like Feng Qianjun only needed three thousand taels. He needed seven hundred thousand! Even if Xiang Shu did rob the bank, he wasn’t going to get that much.

But Xiang Shu had already taken a step forward and walked into the bank.

Like Xifeng, Dongzhe’s main business at that time was savings and high-interest loans. Over the past half-year, Jiangnan had been severely affected by the plague, with sick members in every household. The result of the young and able-bodied falling ill was that they couldn’t farm and had to spend money on treatment, leaving them with no choice but to take out loans to get by.

Xifeng Bank had the best reputation, but in under six months, all of its funds had been borrowed out. Dongzhe, meanwhile, waited patiently until the Feng family had exhausted all their resources before they started to lend money. They raised the interest to one percent a year. The people complained bitterly, but they had no choice; they had to borrow to survive.

When Chen Xing saw the long line outside the door, he realized that the situation with the plague was far worse than Feng Qianjun had described, and his heart tightened. But Xiang Shu spared the long line outside only a brief glance before he went and stood inside the hall.

“That’s the line for loans,” the person at the counter said.

Xiang Shu leaned against the counter, tapping his fingers. “I’m here to withdraw money. Tell your head manager to come out.”

“Bring the deposit receipt,” the cashier said. “The manager is busy __”

Before the cashier could finish his sentence, Xiang Shu seized his collar and yanked him out from behind the counter. The cashier’s face went pale with fear, and his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. The common folk, startled to see this handsome man suddenly act so roughly, began shouting and retreating in panic.

Chen Xing saw that things were getting out of hand and stepped forward to intervene, but Xiang Shu gently set the person down and dusted off his sleeves. Then, calmly but firmly, he repeated, “I’m here to withdraw money. Call your head manager out.”

Though he was both angry and humiliated, the cashier knew he was dealing with someone he couldn’t afford to provoke. He sprinted upstairs.

Chen Xing took a deep breath as he stared at Xiang Shu, who was acting as if nothing had happened. With moments, a bodyguard quickly came down from upstairs. When he saw Chen Xing and Xiang Shu standing with Feng Qianjun, a look of realization came over his face. “Feng-shaoye of Xifeng Bank, what brings you here today?”

Feng Qianjun smirked. “Just accompanying my friends. This has nothing to do with me.”

“The head manager requests your presence,” the bodyguard said, sneering.

On the third floor of the Dongzhe Bank, a group of armed guards surrounded the head manager, preparing for any trouble stirred up by the arrival of the Feng family. Chen Xing nudged Xiang Shu. “Hey, Protector, enough with the antics. I was just joking. Let’s go.”

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, then shifted his gaze to the head manager. He, Chen Xing, and Feng Qianjun were seated at a desk in the hall, across from the head manager. Having expected Feng Qianjun to be there looking for trouble, the head manager was surprised to see the young heir of the Feng family seated calmly on one side of a scholarly-looking youth, who had positioned himself in the center.

Assuming this young man to be the leader, the head manager addressed him politely. “Young sir, may I ask how much you have deposited with us?”

“Uh…” Chen Xing darted a look at Xiang Shu. *I don’t have a single coin here!*

“This has nothing to do with them,” Xiang Shu said evenly, ignoring the tea offered by the Dongzhe staff. “Head Manager, you’re a Han, right? What’s your surname?”

The manager gave Xiang Shu a wary once-over. “Wang.”

Xiang Shu nodded slightly. “A year ago, I went to your branch in Mai City, revealed my identity, and tried to withdraw funds to cover travel expenses. I even left my fingerprint as proof. However, I was told that Dongzhe Bank’s policy during times of war was to accept deposits but refuse withdrawals—no matter who made the request, even if it were the emperor himself. Does this sound familiar?”

Chen Xing recalled the robbery incident in Mai City shortly after he first met Xiang Shu. So that was what he'd been trying to do back then—withdraw money? He actually had funds deposited with Dongzhe? How much?

Feng Qianjun remembered the incident too, and they both turned to look at Xiang Shu with complicated expressions—half surprise and half something else.

Caught off guard, Manager Wang didn't know what to say. If he nodded, he'd be agreeing that they denied withdrawals, a severe breach of trust for a bank—but if he shook his head, he'd be admitting their policy wasn't consistent between branches, which wasn't much better. To be seen as using the chaos of war as an excuse would only damage their reputation further. In such difficult times, it would ruin their standing to be known as a bank that denied funds to those in dire need.

"Absolutely no such policy exists," Manager Wang finally said with a forced smile. "This must have been an unauthorized decision made by the Mai City branch. If they caused any offense, I offer my sincere apologies on their behalf and beg your understanding."

This statement made it seem even more likely to onlookers that Feng Qianjun had come to cause trouble. Still, it was customary to follow protocol—show courtesy before resorting to conflict—to maintain appearances and handle the situation properly.

A guard standing behind Manager Wang spoke up. "If the esteemed guest has the deposit receipt, they can withdraw money from any branch of Dongzhe, no matter where they are in the world. While a gentleman values

wealth, he earns it through proper means. Dongzhe has operated for more than a century, and everything it does is guided by reason and integrity."

Feng Qianjun sneered. The head manager pretended not to notice him and gestured toward Chen Xing, clearly still under the mistaken assumption that he was the leader. The gesture implied, *How much would you like to withdraw?*

"In that case," Xiang Shu said in a level tone, "let me ask you this: Does your bank still remember the Shulü family? My name is Shulü Kong."

"Oh," the head manager replied absentmindedly, "a Tiele clansman, huh? Shulü family… Shulü Kong… Shulü Kong?!"

A sudden realization struck him. Shulü Kong wasn't just any clansman—that was the name of the Great Chanyu of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant! But as he looked at Xiang Shu, he couldn't reconcile the name with the man seated before him. In the minds of most Han people, a Great Chanyu was someone who looked like Huhanye or Fu Jian: bearded, burly, and well into their forties. How could this refined-looking young man be the Great Chanyu? It didn't add up.

"When he was alive," Xiang Shu continued indifferently, "my father stored a sum of money in Dongzhe Bank. By my reckoning, it's been about thirty years. I wonder if there's still a record of the deposit here."

The head manager was momentarily stunned. "Where was it deposited?"

"In Youzhou, Zhuojun," Xiang Shu replied. "Back then, when Dongzhe opened a branch in Zhuojun in order to do business with the Hu beyond the Great Wall, they sought my father, Shulü Wen, to safeguard a sum for the Shulü family. They even promised to lend it to merchants for

trade, and both parties made an agreement with a deposit receipt. After the Xianbei Murong clan took control of Youzhou, I recall that Dongzhe's branch in Zhuojun was doing quite well."

The head manager's expression turned serious. "If it was deposited in silver, there should be a record. All deposit receipts from Dongzhe are sent to the main branch. Each regional branch has copies, and we can verify them. I'll have someone search for it right away."

"How much did your father deposit?" Chen Xing asked Xiang Shu, thinking there could very well be three thousand taels, if not more.

"I don't know. He never counted."

Feng Qianjun was starting to find this interesting, and he was enjoying the spectacle. He turned his gleeful gaze on the head manager, eager to see how he would handle this situation.

The head manager gave a subtle signal to the attendant by his side, and the attendant quickly went downstairs. "It seems we do have it," the head manager said. "When I was young, I heard my predecessor mention it, and he said how grateful we were for the support of the Great Chanyu. It's just that I don't understand why the Great Chanyu has traveled all this way to the Jiangnan region to retrieve it."

As he spoke, someone came up, replaced the tea with a roasted tea similar to what had been served at Xie An's household, and set down some pastries to accompany it.

Xiang Shu did not respond directly. Instead, he asked casually, "Why so many questions? Can you find the receipt? If not, it's fine…"

Chen Xing was momentarily speechless, thinking that Xiang Shu was about to say something like *If you can't find it, then we'll just leave,* and

that everything up to that point had been a bluff. But then Xiang Shu drew two sheepskin scrolls from his robe.

“If you can’t find it, perhaps you’d like to take a look at my receipts?” Xiang Shu said.

These were the sheepskin scrolls Xiang Shu had placed in his box on the boat!

Feng Qianjun was stunned too. The Shulü family had kept something from thirty years ago? And they carried it around with them?

“Are these receipts?” Chen Xing asked incredulously, reaching out to take a look. Xiang Shu didn’t stop him, and the head manager craned his neck to look at them. As Chen Xing untied the knot, someone marched up carrying a wooden box identical to the one Xiang Shu had been carrying. Someone else opened the box, revealing two identical sheepskin scrolls inside.

The head manager shot Xiang Shu a complicated look before lowering his gaze to his own sheepskin scroll.

“One receipt was written thirty years ago,” Xiang Shu explained, “a deposit agreement between Dongzhe and my father. The other one was made eight years ago, when my father was gravely ill and knew his time was short. He summoned the manager of the Youzhou bank to Chi Le Chuan and transferred this part of the Shulü family’s assets to me. You can see that the records bear the fingerprints of both parties.” Indeed, when Chen Xing unwrapped the sheepskin scroll, he saw a row of fingerprints at the bottom.

The head manager read only the beginning of the scroll before he rolled the sheepskin back up and swallowed it whole.

“Hey! What are you doing?! Somebody, quick! Your head manager has gone mad!” Feng Qianjun shouted, and everyone around them surged forward in a panic.

Chen Xing looked up in confusion, not having seen what had happened, and saw the head manager in agony, desperately trying to swallow the sheepskin scroll. “It’s not paper!” he shouted. “You’ll choke to death!”

Chaos erupted. Xiang Shu took a quick step forward, gripping the head manager’s chin, while Feng Qianjun exerted all his strength to pry the sheepskin scroll out of his mouth. The bodyguards tried to snatch the scroll, but they were no match for Xiang Shu, who swiftly knocked them to the floor.

After a long moment, the head manager returned to his senses, gasping for air and staring at the ceiling. Then he turned and made a desperate move toward the window. Again, Feng Qianjun was the first to react. “Quick!” he shouted. “Don’t let him jump!”

An hour later, the meeting was moved to the second floor of the Dongzhe Bank.

“Madam,” someone said. The bank had temporarily closed, and the top dog was finally there. A group of managers escorted a beautiful young woman to the second floor. The scent of her perfume preceded her into the room, a floral blend that made the bank feel like a spring day.

When she saw the head manager twitching in a corner, the woman said, “Take him downstairs, give him a gentle back rub and a bowl of

medicinal soup, and he'll be fine. Let me introduce myself, Great Chanyu. My family name is Wen."

"Madam Wen," Feng Qianjun said, smiling. "It's been a long time since we last met."

This woman, who was the head of Dongzhe Bank, was called Wen Zhe. Dongzhe Bank had been founded by her ancestors. She was dressed in bright red brocade like a newlywed, her face lightly made up, and she exuded a pleasant fragrance and a calm demeanor. "I have heard of the matter in Chang'an regarding Master Feng," she said to Feng Qianjun. "My condolences. May you find peace in your sorrow and not harm your health."

Feng Qianjun nodded. For all that Dongzhe and Xifeng, the world's two largest banks, were bitter enemies, their leaders greeted each other with surprising civility. Their interests clashed and they were in fierce competition, but each merely strived to make a living.

"May I take a look at Young Master Shulü's receipts?" Wen Zhe asked courteously.

Xiang Shu set the four documents side by side in a tray, which was then handed to Wen Zhe. After examining them, she said, speaking softly in the quiet hall, "Dongzhe Bank has never offered interest on deposited funds. Thirty years ago, however, in an effort to establish a presence in Youzhou, a special arrangement was made with the Great Chanyu. Our bank managed the Shulü family's gold and silver, both for safekeeping and for lending to the Murong, Tuoba, and Zhangmao families. Hmm… Dongzhe's loans to the imperial family were always set at ten percent interest, while the Shulü family earned a return of five percent."

“How much is it?” Chen Xing asked, having handed over the sheepskin rolls without fully examining them.

Chapter 53

"A HUNDRED THOUSAND taels of gold," Xiang Shu replied.

"A hundred thousand?!" Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun cried out in unison.

"Yes…that was the exact amount." Wen Zhe's voice trembled a little. "The records have been successfully verified. It has also been exactly thirty years since the money was deposited. It's at five percent interest per year, compounded annually, so if we roll it over thirty times…"

The agent standing to the side promptly took out an abacus and began to calculate the amount. As the beads clicked, Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun exchanged a knowing glance.

"It's 432,200 taels," Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun, and Wen Zhe all said at once. Feng Qianjun looked like he was about to faint.

Finally comprehending the situation, Wen Zhe tried her best to take a deep breath. Her eyes flickered toward Xiang Shu, then darted around the room erratically. She clearly couldn't sit still anymore.

"If the bank really wants to refuse this withdrawal and repudiate the contract, I can't do anything to any of you," Xiang Shu said.

Wen Zhe looked as if he had slapped her. Her face grew red. "Sir, you jest. The records have been verified. Dongzhe did make the arrangement with your father, and your fingerprint has been authenticated. Of course the bank will give you money. How can we refuse?"

Chen Xing felt like he was about to be sick. He hadn't touched the Heart Lamp, yet he felt like he couldn't breathe. It was the first time he'd

ever felt like this.

Xiang Shu had said those words only to pressure Wen Zhe. Having received the expected response, he pressed further. “Okay, take it all out, then.”

Wen Zhe finally broke. “Shulü-daren! Four hundred and thirty thousand taels of gold equates to four million taels of silver. That’s four million strings! Do you know how much those weigh?! Setting aside whether the bank actually has that much silver currently on deposit—if we withdrew it all for you, how could you possibly transport it all?”

“You don’t have to worry about that!” Feng Qianjun chimed in. He had finally managed to calm his breathing, preserving his precious life. “Xifeng has plenty of helpers, so we can have it delivered directly across the street.”

Wen Zhe was speechless.

“Did I say that I’d give it to you?” said Xiang Shu.

“Xiang-xiongdi…no, dage!” Feng Qianjun said quickly. “Shulü-dage! Ge! Ge, it would be exceedingly inconvenient for you to travel around with 275,000 pounds of luggage. The Xifeng Bank will be at your complete disposal. You’ll have the freedom to deposit or withdraw funds at your convenience, and you can withdraw money simply by showing your face.”

“And if you were robbed by Fu Jian again, what would happen to my money?”

Chen Xing had already developed an inkling as to how Xiang Shu would use this matter to blackmail Feng Qianjun within an inch of his life. Delightfully, Feng Qianjun looked as if he had seen a ghost.

“Good point, it’s better to keep it with Dongzhe,” Wen Zhe put in. “Why is it that you want to withdraw so much money now? Shulü-daren… gege! Can you tell us why—”

“Don’t bother,” Xiang Shu said, instantly silencing Wen Zhe. “It’s because you guys offended me at Mai City Bank. I won’t keep my money in Dongzhe anymore.” He got ready to stand up. “Are you going to give me my money or not? If you refuse, I’ll consider it a repudiation of the contract.”

Wen Zhe had no choice but to nod. “But…there truly aren’t that many silver taels in the Jiankang branch at the moment. Even if we added together all the copper coins, it wouldn’t be enough. Please, Shulü-daren, just wait for a few more days so we can transfer the money from other branches.”

“How long do I need to wait?” Xiang Shu asked coldly.

Wen Zhe took a deep breath, considered it for a while, and then said, “We need three months.”

“That isn’t what you told my father back then.”

“How much do you have in the main bank right now?” asked Feng Qianjun. “Just take out whatever you have now. That’ll make it easier for me to have people start moving it over.”

Wen Zhe, who was about to lose a lot more than she had ever gained, was hanging on by a thread. Now, she mustered her strength and looked at her agents, all of them shaking at the knees, and spat, “Go! Check the storeroom! You useless people!”

The Dongzhe Bank’s underground storeroom was thoroughly assessed, and an hour later, they squeezed out four hundred thousand silver

taels, four hundred thousand copper strings, and twenty thousand gold taels. In this period, a string of copper coins was worth a tael of silver, and ten taels of silver were worth a tael of gold. Employees of Xifeng Bank were waiting at the door, having cleared out both rows of the main street and guarded the money as it came out of the storeroom.

Now that Xiang Shu had taken away the equivalent of one million silver, only 3,322,000 remained in the whole bank. Wen Zhe's face was ashen. She looked as if she had been shown her future and found it bleak.

"Take three thousand taels and send it to the Xie household," Xiang Shu commanded in an icy tone.

"Affirmative, Ge!" Feng Qianjun exclaimed. "I'm on it!" Then he trotted off to instruct someone to count the money.

Xiang Shu motioned for Chen Xing to look. Chen Xing watched, wide-eyed, as Xifeng Bank's assistants sprang into action, moving box after box of shining, lustrous silver money out of Dongzhe Bank. Then Xiang Shu made another gesture, his meaning apparent: "Do you want to open it and take a look?"

Chen Xing didn't know what to say.

After Feng Qianjun finished his work, he jogged back. "The two of you must come to my humble abode for dinner," he said sincerely. "Everything's already been prepared. Come, come." As he spoke, he dragged Chen Xing along with him, knowing that if he "kidnapped" Chen Xing, Xiang Shu was sure to follow. In hushed tones, he added, "Chen-xiongdi, please help me pacify Xiang Shu. The future of my bank now lies in your hands."

“Me? Help pacify him?” Chen Xing asked. “When has he ever listened to anything I say? Didn’t you hear the way he bullied me just now? Who knows what he’ll demand of me this time!” He was certain that Xiang Shu would find a way to get back at him.

They walked together for a while before Chen Xing finally glanced back. “Hey!” Xiang Shu shouted.

“Okay, fine!” Chen Xing called back glumly.

Feng Qianjun brought them across the road to Xifeng Bank, which was laid out much like the Songbai Residence in Chang’an. The front was a storefront, and out back was a spacious garden that covered several acres. There was even a martial arts hall for the bank’s armed escorts, jianghu guests, and other such people to use.

“What do you want me to do?” Chen Xing said. “Say it.”

“I haven’t decided yet.” There was actually a hint of a teasing tone in Xiang Shu’s voice. “You’d better be on your best behavior now. I can’t guarantee that I won’t come up with some creative punishments otherwise.”

“Creative punishments? Please, enlighten me, what exactly can you make me do? Commit suicide by jumping into a river?”

“That won’t be necessary. Making you run three laps around Jiankang is enough.”

“You think I can’t run?”

“How about running while you carry Feng Qianjun on your back? I can see a strong bond of brotherhood between you; you’re very supportive of each other. Or maybe running while carrying a bunch of money…”

Chen Xing gritted his teeth and adopted his politest tone. “Then please, Protector-daren, take your time to think.”

It was near dusk when Feng Qianjun finally got his hands on the one million taels of silver. With his immediate crisis relieved, he ceased his attempts to collect Xie An’s debt. He’d known all along that it was a futile task, and Xiang Shu’s life-saving money would last him a long time. Exactly how much was one million taels of silver? To put it into perspective, the grain and provisions Fu Jian had collected from Guanzhong and other areas only added up to eight hundred silver taels. Moreover, the transfer of Dongzhe’s money to Xifeng Bank was a critical blow to the competitor. Feng Qianjun couldn’t have gotten such an advantageous outcome even if he’d physically destroyed Dongzhe’s branch.

So, without further ado, Feng Qianjun ordered wine and food made using the most expensive local ingredients, many of which were more extravagant than anything that could be found in the Xie household. He set the table, opened a twenty-year-old wine, poured it into small cups, and toasted Xiang Shu and Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu maintained his indifferent expression. After swigging his wine down, he lifted the cup and glanced at the bottom of it, conveying a clear message: *This little bit of wine is all you Han people have to offer? It’s not even enough to wet my mouth.* Feng Qianjun, understanding the implication at once, smiled and explained, “This wine may taste mild, Xiang-xiongdi, but it cannot be consumed in the same manner as the wines of the land outside the pass. This twenty-year vintage actually has a very potent aftereffect. My brother reserved this very wine for my wedding—Hey, Chen Xing! Slow down!”

Chen Xing, who had already downed three cups, was giggling. “I think this wine is pretty average, ha ha ha!”

Feng Qianjun hastily instructed the servants to serve the dishes. Suddenly, they were graced with the presence of a young woman, delicate and beautiful, dressed in men’s attire. She appeared to be no more than sixteen years old. She greeted them with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Xiang-xiong, Chen-xiong.”

Chen Xing didn’t reply right away, and he noticed something: This girl bore a resemblance to Princess Qinghe! He turned to Feng Qianjun, who gave a strained smile and introduced her. “This is Gu… Gu…”

“Gu what?” Xiang Shu prompted, then found himself jabbed in the side by Chen Xing without rhyme or reason. Chen Xing gave Xiang Shu a meaningful look. What kind of person had the habit of casually sharing an unmarried Han lady’s name?!

The lady in question, who had already overstepped the bounds of decency by coming to meet her betrothed’s friends like this, smiled at them all. “I’m the Gu family’s young master!” she said. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. What an honor, what an honor! I am Gu Qing. I hear Qianjun speak of you two so often it made me want to meet you myself.”

Chen Xing laughed. “We’ll make sure to pay you a visit you in person when’re free, then.”

Gu Qing had been born to one of Jiangdong’s four prominent families whose lineage dated back to the era of the Three Kingdoms’ Eastern Wu: the Zhu, Zhang, Lu, and Gu families. Though dynasties had changed, the influence of these aristocratic clans endured. Gu Qing finished pouring the

wine, then said, “Whenever you’re in the area, simply send a letter, and you shall be most welcome.”

“Gu-xiandi and Xie An’s niece, Xie Daoyun, were schoolmates,” Feng Qianjun explained, “and we met when I returned to Jiankang before the new year. We’re all brothers here.”

Xiang Shu was the picture of bewilderment. It was crystal clear to both Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing that he was utterly lost and couldn’t grasp the situation or why Feng Qianjun was lying through his teeth and referring to Gu Qing as “xiandi” even though she was clearly a girl. The dining hall was thick with awkwardness. Chen Xing propped his forehead up with one hand and gave Feng Qianjun a pointed look. Feng Qianjun, also aware that his betrothed was not accustomed to socializing with strangers, suggested that Gu Qing retire.

When she was gone, Xiang Shu asked, “Wasn’t that a girl?”

He was actually starting to think there was something wrong with his eyesight until Chen Xing straightened things out by explaining a bunch of Han etiquette and rules to him. It was obvious Feng Qianjun considered them good friends and thus wished to introduce them to his fiancée.

Xiang Shu nodded his head. He seemed to want to say something, but he hesitated.

“I actually was scared you guys would say something just then,” Feng Qianjun said. “Uh…forget it, it’s fine.”

Chen Xing knew what Feng Qianjun was afraid they’d point out: Gu Qing’s resemblance to Princess Qinghe. “Feng-dage,” he said, amused and exasperated, “in your mind, are we really that inconsiderate?”

Feng Qianjun smiled helplessly, shaking his head, but Xiang Shu said, “This is more or less what I expected of you. You’re no paragon of virtue yourself, Feng Qianjun.”

Chen Xing was confused. Feng Qianjun’s smile turned bitter. “Yes, I admit it. I grew interested in her the moment we met just because she looks like Qinghe.”

Chen Xing finally understood. “Ignore him. It’s easy for him to say __”

“I remember you agreeing to do one thing for me,” remarked Xiang Shu. Chen Xing shut his mouth, lest Xiang Shu make him run three laps around Jiankang weighed down with a bunch of copper coins.

Feng Qianjun shook his head, raised a cup, and changed the subject. “Xiang Shu, let me toast you. I’m truly grateful to you for today. Thank you!” Xiang Shu picked up his cup and clinked it against Feng Qianjun’s, and Feng Qianjun smiled again. “Another toast to our chance meeting—to fate for bringing us together again. Although Xiang-xiong finds me a nuisance and doesn’t wish to see me…”

The three of them clinked their cups. Chen Xing was overjoyed and also becoming tipsy. “That’s not true,” he assured Feng Qianjun. “Xiang Shu is a very good person.”

“Shut up,” said Xiang Shu.

Feng Qianjun burst into laughter and refilled their plates. As he ate, Chen Xing started to feel even tipsier with the potent after-effects of the wine. He leaned back against the table, his gaze flitting between Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun as he listened to their conversation.

“Qing-er was originally studying arts with Xie Daoyun at Zhu Jin’s household,” Feng Qianjun was saying. “Zhu Jin is a renowned scholar who is celebrated as a divine doctor in Jiangnan. I sustained minor injuries in Luoyang and sought treatment from him when I returned, and it was there that I first met Qing-er. It was like meeting an old friend; we just clicked. Speaking of the Gu family…their business has expanded significantly, leading to frequent internal conflicts and schemes. Qing-er’s father passed away when she was young, so she was raised by her maternal line in the Gu family, who always treated her coldly. I intend to bring her home—”

“So you’re taking advantage of an orphan with a widowed mother and preparing to marry her into the Feng family,” Xiang Shu interjected.

Feng Qianjun found this both funny and embarrassing. “Am I, though? That’s not necessarily true—if Gu Qing marries into my family, she’s marrying beneath her station! Who would marry their daughter to a bank owner? If she all she truly wanted was a change in households, she’d have her pick of men in Jiankang.”

Chen Xing smiled. “Well said. Xiang Shu, you don’t understand. How do I put this…” He leaned on his arm and rubbed at his eyebrows. “Among us Han people, between scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, it is merchants who have the lowest status. Oh, never mind. Feng-dage, there’s no need for further explanation. If you both cherish each other, all you need is to live happily.”

Xiang Shu pressed Chen Xing’s head with one hand, guiding him to turn slightly. Chen Xing reached for the wine jar, but Xiang Shu wouldn’t let him drink anymore; he took away the wine and urged Chen Xing to eat instead. Soon the sky began to darken, and it was time for people to light the lanterns. Chen Xing had limited tolerance for alcohol and succumbed to

its effects first, leaving Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu to continue drinking and conversing. Xiang Shu maintained his usual apathetic expression throughout, mostly listening to Feng Qianjun speak. He didn't seem particularly annoyed, but neither was he genuinely curious, as though whatever Feng Qianjun said held little meaning for him.

"My dage is gone. I heard from Chen Xing that your xiongdi is dead." Feng Qianjun downed three more cups, sighing. "You understand how I feel, Shulü Kong." Xiang Shu remained silent, and Feng Qianjun laughed. "Since the day I left Chang'an, I've wanted to return to my childhood—when my dage was still alive, my sister-in-law was still with us, and everybody lived together in happiness. But in the blink of an eye, everyone is gone."

Xiang Shu poured himself a cup and drank it in one gulp.

Feng Qianjun sighed. "I often find myself wondering, can we avenge them? But even if we do, what will it achieve? What if we choose not to avenge them? They're no longer here. What is the purpose of focusing on the pursuit of revenge?"

Finally, Xiang Shu spoke. "There is none. Vengeance is just a means of finding closure for oneself. The people themselves are dead, and what do the dead know?"

Feng Qianjun smiled. When it came to assessing people, he possessed sharper intuition than Chen Xing, and he was familiar with Xiang Shu's bearing and manner of speech by now. Xiang Shu was a man of few words; if he disagreed with someone, he'd get to his feet and settle it with action, and he had an aura that discouraged people from getting too close. But Feng Qianjun also knew that these facts didn't tell the whole story. It was more

accurate to say that Xiang Shu simply had no interest in engaging in idle chatter or interacting earnestly with most people. Why? Because people were hypocrites. Xiang Shu wore his disgust for them on his sleeve.

“Who knows how many people feign smiles while they’re secretly cursing someone in their hearts?” Feng Qianjun said, chuckling to himself. “Who knows how many people are plotting against others while pretending to look out for their best interests? Xiang-xiong, sometimes I truly envy you…”

Feng Qianjun tried to pat Xiang Shu’s shoulder with his free hand, but Xiang Shu flicked him away. “Indeed. They shower you with compliments, but you can never truly know a person’s heart. It’s just like how you act toward your Qing-er-xiandi. Ah, by the way, does she know about Princess Qinghe?”

Feng Qianjun opened his drunken eyes. “I’m inhumane! That’s it, okay?! I’m a bastard! I’m not like you; I can’t just say ‘go fuck yourself!’ to anything I don’t find pleasing!”

Xiang Shu didn’t answer. He finished the last of his wine, then grabbed Chen Xing’s collar and pulled his head up a little. Observing that Chen Xing was drunk to the point of unconsciousness, Xiang Shu put him down again and prepared to take him away.

Feng Qianjun made to slap Chen Xing awake, but Xiang Shu flicked away his hand again, so he slapped the table instead. “Hey! Xiao-Xingxing! Get up!”

“Urkh…” Chen Xing murmured, still dazed.

Feng Qianjun was unable to resist asking: “How are things between the two of you?”

“What business is that of yours?” Xiang Shu asked in a tone that held a subtle threat.

Feng Qianjun waved a hand. “It’s fate that we all came to know each other. Why do you constantly wear an expression of disdain on your face? We made it through a life-and-death situation together…”

Xiang Shu wrapped one arm around Chen Xing’s ribs, carefully adjusted his posture, and then lifted Chen Xing into his arms like a bride, without once acknowledging what Feng Qianjun was saying.

“You gave up being the Great Chanyu, all for him,” Feng Qianjun said, laughing, from behind Xiang Shu. “And not only did you not tell him about it, you kept it from him for a very long time. You’re fascinating.”

“I’ll withdraw the money and deposit it back in Dongzhe Bank.”

This startled Feng Qianjun almost to the point of sobriety. “Don’t! Gege! I’ll shut up!”

Xiang Shu walked away with Chen Xing in his arms. When he reached the patio, he paused contemplatively for a moment but didn’t look back.

“The departed can never return,” he said seriously, “but there are still people by your side. Cherish the ones you have now. And for the record, my resignation as Great Chanyu was not solely for him. There are many questions that I need to answer for myself.”

Feng Qianjun raised his hand and smiled. “You have a point. You’d better remember it too.”

Saying nothing more, Xiang Shu carried Chen Xing out of the bank.

It was nearly dawn, and the entire city of Jiankang was asleep. The rows of shops that lined either side of Zhuque Street were all closed. The silver stream of the Milky Way, arching alone over the spring night, stretched so far it seemed to transcend time. Its stars cascaded down like a waterfall—like a dragon's footprints on the curtain of the night. With Chen Xing in his arms, Xiang Shu raised his head and admired the glittering silver traces in the night sky.

The Milky Way in the south was no different than in the north. It made every life on the planet seem utterly insignificant, a mere speck of existence under the vast canvas of heaven. Xiang Shu watched the sky for a while as he walked past Zhuque Street and back to Wuyi Lane. When he heard the sound of a muted bell from a distant market, he absently turned his head. At first he thought it was the watchman making a round, but the bell only sounded once before falling silent.

That struck Xiang Shu as strange. But just then, Chen Xing stirred. The alcohol seemed to have him trapped somewhere halfway between sleep and consciousness, and he grabbed the front of Xiang Shu's collar.

"Shifu," Chen Xing murmured. He was dreaming of the night in his childhood when his shifu carried him away from Mount Hua.

Xiang Shu looked down at him. Chen Xing's face was flushed, his head buried in Xiang Shu's front, and suddenly, Xiang Shu didn't want to return to the Xie household. After a quick glance around to survey his surroundings, he leaped up with Chen Xing in his arms. Crossing the wall outside of Taichu Palace, he flew to the roof of the southernmost hall and then leaped a few more bounds until he arrived at the palace's highest point. There, he seated himself on the tiled roof.

Chen Xing lay beside him, his arm slung loosely around Xiang Shu, using him as a pillow. He was still intoxicated. Xiang Shu settled in to gaze at the Milky Way for a while, but then Chen Xing said, “Shifu, Xing-er won’t make it… There’s only two and a half years left, it’s too hard…”

Xiang Shu looked back down at him, his brow furrowing.

“There isn’t enough time,” Chen Xing muttered, curling up in Xiang Shu’s arms. “There’s only a little time left… Please give me some more time…”

Xiang Shu didn’t understand what he meant. “What are you saying?”

“Xing-er… Xing-er…” Chen Xing whispered. “Xing-er is so tired… Xing-er wants…to go home…”

Chen Xing didn’t say anything more after that. He let go of Xiang Shu and turned over with his back facing him. Xiang Shu thought about what Chen Xing had just said.

“What will happen in two and a half years?” Xiang Shu asked. “Is there more to it? Why won’t you tell me?”

“Mai City… I’m sorry,” Chen Xing murmured. “It was also my fault…”

Xiang Shu knew deep down that Chen Xing was still thinking about this matter. If he hadn’t sent the fallen soldiers back to Mai City with Feng Qianjun, the plague wouldn’t have spread. But how could they have possibly foreseen the connection to the drought fiends back then?

“Even if you hadn’t returned the deceased,” Xiang Shu said, frowning, “do you truly believe Shi Hai wouldn’t have found other means of spreading the plague? Why do you always take all the blame upon yourself?”

But Chen Xing couldn’t hear him. Under the Milky Way’s majesty, his dream gradually subsided, leaving in its place an incomparable sense of peace. The Heart Lamp was like a pool of tranquil water, refracting a gentle light in his heart.

Chapter 54

WHEN CHEN XING woke up, he was back in the Xie household. He had no recollection of the previous night's events. The last thing he could remember was a vague sense that he had been drinking with Feng Qianjun.

After washing up, Chen Xing passed through the patio and made his way to the main hall. The first person he saw was his host, Xie An, who had just returned from court. "Morning."

But the moment Xie An saw Chen Xing, his expression became very strange. Xiang Shu was in the hall too, sitting alone and eating lunch, and he glanced at Chen Xing but said nothing.

"His Majesty sent for me at the last minute yesterday," Xie An explained. "I apologize for making you wait so long."

Chen Xing was used to Xie An's antics by now, but he didn't bother trying to catch him off guard. He just asked, "Oh? What did His Majesty want? Have you paid off your debt yet?"

"Ah, for those seven hundred thousand taels of silver, His Majesty issued an edict and sent it to the Feng family today," said Xie An. "I'm confident the solution will be satisfying for all involved."

That edict just declares the debt is to be written off, doesn't it? Chen Xing thought. He glanced at Xiang Shu. "Did I get drunk last night?"

Xie An and Xiang Shu exchanged a great deal of information in a single shared glance.

Chen Xing started to feel uneasy. "I didn't do anything strange yesterday, right?"

“All you did was cause a huge ruckus in the Xie mansion,” said Xiang Shu. “Then you jumped into the vat for growing lotuses, thinking that you would take a bath.”

Chen Xing’s jaw dropped.

“Xiang-xiongdi wanted to pull you out,” Xie An added, “but instead you wrapped an arm around him, pulled and tugged at him, and kissed—”

Xiang Shu coughed, and Xie An stopped talking. Chen Xing’s face flamed red with mortification. He coughed several times and then said, “So I hear that there’s a plague in Jiangnan?”

Xie An didn’t know much about this new topic. He thought for a moment. “I seem to remember that some time last year, there was an epidemic in Kuaiji…but it was dealt with a good while ago. Where did you hear of this?”

Xie An had worked in the Ministry of Personnel before he became the Minister of Internal Affairs. He was responsible for organizing the soldiers of the northern prefectures and mediating between the scholars, the imperial family, and the nobles. He was seldom involved in the lives of the civilians, and what little he knew he had only caught wind of from the Ministry of Revenue. He was certain, however, that if Chen Xing was asking, it was no small issue.

“I will send somebody to the Ministry of Revenue immediately to inquire,” he said.

Chen Xing hurried to stop him. “It’s fine. I’ll investigate on my own.”

“Yesterday, His Majesty mentioned that he wanted to meet you two,” Xie An added. “I objected, but if you have time, I think it would not hurt.”

This surprised both Chen Xing and Xiang Shu. Seeing their reactions, Xie An gathered that Chen Xing had no plans to join the imperial court and become an official.

“Many thanks, then,” Chen Xing replied with a smile. “Before we leave Jiankang, I will find a chance to visit His Majesty. It wouldn’t do to be discourteous.”

Xiang Shu’s shock was for a different reason, though. He was surprised to learn that unlike Fu Jian in the north, with his absolute power, the emperors of the Sima family in the south could be negotiated with. Apparently it was no big deal to object to an imperial command.

After lunch, Chen Xing went outside. Without saying a word, Xiang Shu changed into another set of clothes and followed him out. Usually, they did each get irritated if the other was intruding all the time, but when it was time to actually do work, Chen Xing was accustomed to Xiang Shu following him around silently.

Unfortunately, after yesterday’s drunken escapade, there was an awkward energy hanging between them. Chen Xing wanted to ask what exactly had happened last night, but he was afraid the details would make it even worse, so he held his tongue. Like always, Xiang Shu was walking with him, unsmiling. Neither of them had saddled a horse, so they went on foot.

The two of them spent the entire journey out of Wuyi Lane and onto Zhuque Street in utter silence. The longer they walked on, the more awkward the silence became. Finally, Chen Xing cleared his throat.

“Ahem! You—”

“You—” Xiang Shu had chosen the same moment to say something.

They both fell silent again. Chen Xing stopped walking. Internally, he was freaking out.

Finally, Xiang Shu said, “If you’re looking for sick people, you won’t find them on the street.”

“I know!”

“Shall we buy two horses?”

“Why should we?” Chen Xing asked reflexively. “Is it really all that amazing to have money? I can walk there on my own!”

“You want to walk all the way to Kuaiji?”

Chen Xing glared at Xiang Shu and started moving again, making his way through Zhuque Street. “I don’t want to go to Kuaiji right this moment. Let’s go take a look at the local clinics. The doctors here might know something.”

In addition to being an exorcist, Chen Xing was a doctor. He knew doctors were always abreast of the latest news, because their patients brought them all sorts of information. And doctors were just like merchants, with their own unique guilds.

“Right, you never told me: What exactly is Sui Xing?” Xiang Shu asked, seemingly off-handedly.

Chen Xing’s heart skipped a beat. “Sui Xing? Why are you asking about Sui Xing all of a sudden?”

“I remembered it when I was studying the writings about the Acala Blade last night. I’m just asking.”

Xiang Shu stood still, his eyes narrowed against the sunlight to scrutinize Chen Xing. The two of them had always talked to each other like this: Xiang Shu posed a question, and if Chen Xing knew the answer, he explained it to him. If he didn't know, then he'd always admit it.

"Oh?" Chen Xing said, a little surprised. "Have you finished learning the mantras in the scroll?"

"You haven't answered me yet," said Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing sighed. "Every person's fate has nine palaces written into it. It may be the Advisor, or perhaps the Army, the Field Marshal, or the Greedy Wolf. Every star in the sky is assigned to one of those palaces, and one star reigns supreme over the entirety of your fate. This star is called your Star of Destiny. Astrology is a very complicated art to explain; I myself don't understand it thoroughly yet…"

"So your Star of Destiny is Sui Xing?" Xiang Shu asked. "What determines this?"

"It's said to be the time of your birth, or the stars themselves and their interests. Who knows?"

"How many other people have had Sui Xing as their Star of Destiny?"

Chen Xing wanted to change the subject, but Xiang Shu wouldn't stop asking him questions. "There are very few people whose Star of Destiny is Sui Xing. There's one of us only every few millennia."

"People with Sui Xing as their Star of Destiny have good luck for their entire lives, is that correct?"

"Um…" Chen Xing hesitated. "Why do you have so many questions? Theoretically, that's correct, but… Oh, forget it. Don't you think I have

good luck?”

“But what?” Xiang Shu asked suspiciously.

“It’s nothing. What’s your problem with me? If there’s something you’re unsatisfied with, just say it outright.”

“There’s nothing I’m unsatisfied with. I just don’t think your luck is all that. Why didn’t Sui Xing send you money yesterday?”

“Throughout our entire journey, how many accidents have we run into that we just happened to escape from unscathed?” Chen Xing protested. “That was all Sui Xing! What did you think it was?”

“That was all because I was saving you!” Xiang Shu shot back.

Chen Xing stared at Xiang Shu, then broke into a sudden smile. “Finding you and being with you—doesn’t that sound like my good luck?”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond. Chen Xing hadn’t meant to say it at first, but when Xiang Shu mentioned Sui Xing, it got Chen Xing thinking. If he only had a few years left, then what was the point of holding things back out of pride?

Wait. Anxiety crept in. Could it be that when Chen Xing got drunk the previous night, he’d let something slip to Xiang Shu?

But Xiang Shu dropped his interrogation, so it made no sense for Chen Xing to keep giving him answers. He’d realized over the past few days that Xiang Shu had changed. Now that he had given up his position as the Great Chanyu, he was finally himself again in front of Chen Xing. The real Xiang Shu was just another young man, a little wary, a little curious about the world around him.

The streets of Jiankang were arranged in a neat grid, with eight vertical and eight horizontal lines crisscrossing each other. After the Han had migrated south, their cities were all built to mimic Chang'an. Jiankang's main clinic was situated along the westernmost street, Baihu Road, and Chen Xing and Xiang Shu arrived to find many people walking around in front of it. Over their heads hung the name plaque that Wang Xizhi had mentioned: Miaoshou Huichun, meaning "youth-restoring miracle hands."

Why do I see this guy's calligraphy wherever I go around here? Chen Xing wondered. *It's nice looking, but it's everywhere. You get a bit sick of it, seeing it so much.*

It was rumored that the divine doctor of Jiankang, Zhu Jin, practiced in the halls of Huichun. However, Zhu Jin only came to the clinic for a short time in the mornings, and sometimes he forwent it altogether because he had to treat patients in the Imperial Palace instead. When Chen Xing and Xiang Shu arrived, they found the only person diagnosing patients in the hall was a young woman in men's clothing. There was a curtain at her side, behind which another person was preparing a prescription for her.

"Patients need to go line up outside," the female doctor said automatically the moment she noticed Chen Xing. "There's a lot of people here. First come, first serve."

Chen Xing pretended to be grievously ill. "I…I'm going to die… Doctor, my illness is urgent…"

"Whose isn't?" The doctor could obviously see right through him. "Get in line! Otherwise, don't blame me for not being polite!"

But as she spoke, they heard an exclamation from behind the curtain. The person making the medicine pushed the curtain aside—it was Gu Qing, this time dressed in women's clothing. "Chen-xiongdi?" she said, smiling.

Chen Xing smiled back. The doctor looked surprised, and her expression grew a little less stern. "I'm not actually here for a diagnosis," Chen Xing explained. "I'm a doctor too. I'm here to talk to you."

He introduced himself and Xiang Shu. The doctor glanced at Xiang Shu a few times, but she didn't remark on him. "How about you sit down and have some tea?" she said. "I'll let you throw down the gauntlet after I finish diagnosing this batch of patients."

Chen Xing was a little taken aback by how obstinate she was, but when he thought about how he acted when he treated patients, he realized that he was the same. Sure, the world around him was important, but nothing was as important as his patients' lives.

Gu Qing put down her work to serve Chen Xing and Xiang Shu tea. "Hey!" the doctor cried indignantly, but Gu Qing waved her hands, still smiling. These two visitors were distinguished guests, after all. Resigned but wearing a sour expression, the doctor called somebody to cover for Gu Qing.

A short while later, Gu Qing sat Chen Xing and Xiang Shu off to the side and served them licorice tea that had steeped in the clinic.

"I apologize for disturbing you so soon when we only just met yesterday," Chen Xing said. "How should I refer to the doctor over there?"

"She is my shijie," Gu Qing whispered.

The doctor overheard them, saving Chen Xing from having to ask for a family name or some other form of address. "Xie Daoyun," she said, then

turned back to the patient in front of her. “What illness do you have? Let me see your tongue.”

Xie Daoyun… Wasn’t this Xie An’s niece? But with those long eyebrows that tilted toward the temples, her face bare of rouge powder, and her cold, severe countenance, Chen Xing thought she looked more like a female Xiang Shu. Feng Qianjun had mentioned the previous night that Gu Qing and Xie Daoyun were studying under Zhu Jin. It was a wonder that after learning so much about medicine, they would choose to spend their time diagnosing patients.

Chen Xing looked at Xie Daoyun again. She wore a set of martial robes, he noticed, and her presence filled the room. She spoke intelligently and behaved courteously. As he watched her make her diagnosis, he observed that medicine was practiced somewhat differently in Jiangnan than in the Central Plains, Guanzhong, and other such areas. The medicinal practice of the Central Plains focused primarily on the theory of yin and yang and the harmonization of the five elements. If there was a problem, then the doctor first focused on identifying the cause: Was it a yin deficiency or a yang deficiency? Then, once the cause was found, the doctor could help the person restore the balance between yin and yang in their body. Southerners, on the other hand, paid more attention to specific symptoms and then prescribed medicine for those symptoms.

Xie Daoyun’s skills were top-notch. After she finished with the current round of patients, she hung up a sign indicating that she was taking a break so that another doctor would see to the other patients. She went inside to clean up, changed into women’s clothes, then invited Chen Xing and Xiang Shu inside the hall.

As Chen Xing settled in to explain why they were there, Xiang Shu stood up to study Zhu Jin's collection of works. Wherever he went, he always seemed to want to see how the owner had furnished the place. "Those are all my shifu's books," Xie Daoyun told him. "If you're curious, feel free to take one out and look through it."

Xiang Shu nodded and pulled out a manuscript about astrology; still standing, he flipped through the pages.

Chen Xing explained why they had come, and Xie Daoyun looked thoughtful. "The plague? This is the second time this year somebody has asked about the plague. Can you tell me why you're inquiring about it?"

This surprised Chen Xing. "Who else asked?"

"Qing-er's lordly sweetheart, naturally." Xie Daoyun's words were tinged with dissatisfaction.

"Do I detect a hint of sourness?" Chen Xing mused aloud. "Is there vinegar in this study?"

"If you don't wish to tell me why, that's fine, but I'll ask you to leave."

Chen Xing smiled. "I won't hide anything from you. It won't make a difference if I tell you anyway. I am an exorcist."

Xie Daoyun's demeanor changed immediately. "An exorcist?!"

Gu Qing's expression turned a bit strange too, but Chen Xing didn't see it. Still smiling, he described the situation to Xie Daoyun. As he neared the end of his tale, Xie Daoyun's expression became more and more ugly; only her iron-clad will was stopping her from running them right out of the clinic.

Finally, Chen Xing noticed that something was wrong. “Um… Do you have some bad blood with one of my colleagues?”

“Leave!” yelled Xie Daoyun. “Fuck off! You bunch of wandering swindlers! Deceiving the common folk into not seeing a doctor so you can sell them charmed water instead! You people toyed with my betrothed and conned my uncle, and now he refuses to do any proper business! All he does is sit around and ‘cultivate’!”

“I, um… It’s not like that! We aren’t swindlers! L-look at this—”

“Shijie!” Gu Qing put in hurriedly. “They aren’t like that! They really aren’t!”

Xie Daoyun ignored her. “How many more members of the Wang and Xie families do you want to poison?!” She pointed to the door. “Get out! Get out of my sight, now!”

“Wait, no, look at this! I can glow, see?!” Chen Xing activated the Heart Lamp and showed it to Xie Daoyun. “Come on, check it out, take a look.”

He sounded like such a swindler it left everyone else in the room speechless.

“It really isn’t what you think,” he insisted. “We don’t practice medicine. No, wait, sometimes I practice medicine, but I would never make somebody drink charmed water…”

Xiang Shu couldn’t bear to listen to any more of this. He turned around and unstrapped the sword from his back.

“The Heart Lamp,” Xiang Shu demanded.

When the light in Chen Xing's hands shone brighter, Xiang Shu waved his sword. Glowing brilliantly, the Acala Blade transformed into a longbow. Xie Daoyun shot to her feet and looked at Xiang Shu in disbelief. Xiang Shu waved it again, and the longbow shifted into a rope of light. Chen Xing had never seen the rope of light before, so he was surprised too. "What's that?" he asked.

"You two didn't work out this act together before you came in here?" Xie Daoyun asked.

Xiang Shu lifted the rope of light and brandished it into empty space, and it wound around his body. The three onlookers wondered if Xiang Shu was about to demonstrate how to tie himself up, but then the light rope melted into a wheel of knives. Chen Xing's jaw dropped. *What is all this? When did Xiang Shu learn it? Did he learn these methods from the bamboo scroll?*

With another wave, the wheel of light morphed into a long pole. Xiang Shu pressed his palms against the pole, and it shortened into a shining arrow. Finally, he grabbed the arrow and swung it through the air; it turned back into his sword, and he sheathed it.

Xiang Shu gestured for them to continue, then went back to his reading.

Gu Qing clapped a few times. Xie Daoyun moved as if she was about to do the same and maybe offer him an encouraging shout, but then she stopped; it seemed something wasn't right. She was still looking at Xiang Shu warily.

"Let's sit down and talk properly," said Chen Xing. "To be honest, I'm also confused about Xie-daren, who claims to be my shixiong. And

why don’t you find some time for your fiancé to have a chat with me? I promise you to dispel any ideas he might have about seeking immortality, okay?” This, at last, swayed Xie Daoyun, and she sat down again. Her expression was so sullen that Chen Xing asked, “Are all the nobles in Jiangnan obsessed with cultivation?”

“How would I know?” Xie Daoyun asked. “It was those alchemists who brought this ruin upon us.”

Back in the day, Jiangnan had been full of scholars and literati, but ever since the Jin court moved to the north, those types preferred to seclude themselves in the mountains, searching for immortals and becoming enlightened about the Dao. They eschewed worldly customs, instead spending their time refining pills or drawing talismans. Xie Daoyun’s fiancé, Wang Ningzhi, was Wang Xizhi’s second son, and he spent every day cooped up at home—meditating and comprehending the secrets of heaven or taking out his large tripod and burning cinnabar to refine mercury to eat. Many “famous scholars” of the Jiangnan region practically subsisted on mercury pills and ate so much that everything they owned was covered in mercury. Of course Xie Daoyun was angry.

“Let’s not talk about the plague just now,” Chen Xing said sincerely. “With time, you will come to understand that I’m not faking any mystical powers or trying to cause trouble.”

After Xiang Shu’s demonstration, Xie Daoyun already half believed him, but she was still skeptical about the existence of anything supernatural. “So what? You’re investigating what this plague has to do with the so-called drought fiends, right? Well, in this world, there is no such thing as the dead coming back to life! If you want to convince me, then you’ll have to let me see it with my own two eyes. Otherwise, I won’t believe you.”

“I cannot agree to that,” Chen Xing replied. “It’s better if you never have to see such a sight.”

“Qianjun was extremely worried about this recently too,” whispered Gu Qing. “We haven’t figured it out ourselves yet, but it may really be as you’ve said.”

Xie Daoyun turned to Gu Qing. “Let me talk. You’re so slow we’re all going to die of impatience. Once we’ve finished talking, you can send them off.” She took out a transcription of a patient’s oral report and showed it to Chen Xing. “This plague has been rampant in Jiangnan since the beginning of this year. After Mai City was infected, the roads were all sealed off, but some people still managed to leave during that period.”

Chen Xing looked over the records as he listened to Xie Daoyun’s explanation. The records corroborated Feng Qianjun’s account of the patients’ conditions. Those infected by the plague became so drowsy that even getting out of bed became difficult. Their complexions were normal, with no visible abnormalities on the skin or tongue, but their pulses were weak.

The symptoms waxed and waned. During the day, the infected tended to have a lot of energy, but when night fell, their consciousnesses became blurry, and they behaved as if they’d lost their very souls. The disease had gradually spread from Kuaiji to Danyang, Moling, and various other places, and according to the information exchanged between the medical practitioners’ guilds, it was estimated that roughly fifty million had already been infected.

“Can we rule out poison?” Chen Xing asked. Maybe this didn’t have much to do with the drought fiends after all.

“Poison would be impossible,” Xie Daoyun said. “The doctors can’t tell how it did come about, though. All they can do is prescribe supplements to their patients.” Xie Daoyun had seen a few of those patients herself and found that they all shared two peculiarities: their eyes were blurry, and they were often distracted when they spoke. It was like some essential part of them was missing.

The medicines the doctors prescribed for the patients consisted mostly of expensive tonics requiring ginseng, antlers, and other highly nourishing ingredients. How could an ordinary person afford that? And those who could afford the ingredients still barely recovered. They could talk, get out of bed, and walk around, but the moment the medication wore off, they would return to their previous state. As a result, people in the counties jokingly called it the “noble illness.”

“These are all strong and dry yang-oriented medicines,” Chen Xing observed, grasping the key points. “If the patients are moved outside at noon to bask in the sun, is there any improvement?”

“Yes,” Xie Daoyun said, surprised.

“Yang deficiencies hurt the soul. The three immortal souls are yang and the seven mortal forms are yin, so this illness affects the yang souls,” Chen Xing surmised. Then he asked the most important questions. “What was the name of the first patient? Where were they from? Are there any records of them?”

“Those are good questions. The first patient with any records was a trader—Wait, your friend, is he all right?”

Chen Xing turned his head to look behind him just as there was a sudden crash. Xiang Shu had pressed a hand against his forehead and

swayed suddenly, knocking over a row of books on the shelf.

“Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing was shocked, and he leaped up to support him, instantly forgetting his discussion with Xie Daoyun. “Are you all right?!”

Once Xiang Shu had steadied himself, he waved his hands to express that he was fine. “It’s nothing. I drank too much yesterday. I’m just a little dizzy today.”

Xie Daoyun got up and pulled aside the curtain in the study. Xiang Shu shook his head hard, placed the books back on the shelf, and looked at Chen Xing, his eyes betraying some unidentifiable emotion. Then he leaned back against the bookshelf and slowly slid to the ground.

“Xiang Shu!” Something was terribly wrong. Chen Xing had never seen Xiang Shu show any weakness before, not once in the entire time he’d known him. Xiang Shu claimed he was immune to all kinds of poisons, and Chen Xing had never seen him get sick. How had this come over him so quickly?

Xie Daoyun looked at Xiang Shu suspiciously, thinking that he and Chen Xing were putting on a show again. “What happened?” she demanded. “Did you get dizzy?”

Chen Xing knelt in front of Xiang Shu, summoned the Heart Lamp, and pressed it against Xiang Shu’s heart. “Xiang Shu? How do you feel?”

“I feel a little tired suddenly,” Xiang Shu replied. “It’s nothing; I’ll be fine in a bit.”

Xie Daoyun stared at him.

“You’re a little tired?” asked Gu Qing. She proceeded to open the windows and all the doors to let the air in.

Xiang Shu took a deep breath. “I want to rest for a while.”

Chen Xing was a doctor himself. First he felt Xiang Shu’s forehead: no abnormality. Then he felt his pulse: all normal there too. What now? This had happened so quickly! Lost, he turned to Xie Daoyun, who realized then that they weren’t acting.

She turned to Gu Qing in turn and said, “Bring him to the yard in the back.”

Chapter 55

FOR SOME REASON, Xiang Shu felt abruptly exhausted, though his mind remained clear. Chen Xing helped him to the backyard and laid him down on a sickbed in Huichun Hall.

Xie Daoyun glanced at Chen Xing as he took Xiang Shu's pulse. "Have you two come into contact with anyone unusual recently?"

"We just arrived in Jiankang the day before yesterday," Chen Xing replied. "We've met a lot of people, but no one…strange."

"Have you eaten anything unusual?"

Chen Xing thought back. They had been staying at the Xie household, and the food had been normal. Xiang Shu hadn't even drunk any tea at Dongzhe Bank, though Chen Xing himself had drunk quite a bit. After nightfall, all they'd had was wine at Feng Qianjun's house, and there was no way Feng Qianjun harbored any ill intentions toward them. He answered Xie Daoyun's questions one by one, and from his answers, Xie Daoyun realized that the guest staying at her uncle's house was none other than Chen Xing.

Holding Xiang Shu's hand tightly, Chen Xing channeled the Heart Lamp's energy into Xiang Shu's meridians. Strangely, he didn't sense anything unusual. "Could it be…?"

Xie Daoyun did not respond.

Xiang Shu didn't fall asleep. Instead, he lifted his free hand and rubbed his thumb against his forehead a few times. Chen Xing asked, "Xiang Shu, are you feeling sleepy?"

“No,” Xiang Shu said, frowning, though he lacked strength. “Let’s head back.” Gu Qing brought over a bowl of thick medicinal soup from which Chen Xing detected the strong scent of ginseng. “I don’t need to drink that,” Xiang Shu insisted. “I’m not tired, and it’s not the plague.”

“Why don’t you try it?” Chen Xing suggested. Xiang Shu reached out irritably to block the bowl, but Chen Xing said firmly, “I’ll feed you; just behave.”

Xie Daoyun observed the interaction between them and glanced at Gu Qing, who forced a smile and nodded that Xie Daoyun’s intuition was correct. Xie Daoyun frowned a little, looking concerned.

Xiang Shu relented. “Fine, I’ll drink it myself.”

Chen Xing knew Xiang Shu didn’t like showing weakness in front of others, so he didn’t press the issue. After drinking the soup, Xiang Shu appeared to regain a bit of energy.

“What herbs are in it?” Chen Xing asked Xie Daoyun.

“Ginseng, Eucommia bark, teasel root, psoralea…” Xie Daoyun rattled off a dozen ingredients, all potent tonic herbs with strong yang properties. “The prescription was from my master.”

Xiang Shu stood up, not wanting to stay in the medicine hall any longer, and Chen Xing stood up too, having learned most of what he needed from Xie Daoyun. He apologized for taking up their time, and Xie Daoyun didn’t ask for any payment for the medicine. She had Gu Qing see them out and ready a carriage to take them back to the Xie residence.

“Are you feeling any better?” Chen Xing asked, surprised by both Xiang Shu and himself. He’d always seen Xiang Shu as someone who was

capable of anything. Somewhere along the line, he had forgotten that however powerful Xiang Shu was, he was made of flesh and blood; he was a human who needed food, water, and rest. Seeing him suddenly become sick had sent Chen Xing into a panic, and he was still anxious and worried. Throughout the carriage ride, Chen Xing kept checking Xiang Shu's pulse—he couldn't stop himself.

Xiang Shu was deep in thought and didn't answer right away. Chen Xing called his name a few times before Xiang Shu snapped out of it and met his gaze. "I told you," Xiang Shu said, annoyed, "I'm not tired. You don't believe me?"

Chen Xing just nodded. He didn't know what to do. He had to hope it wasn't a big deal.

"More than two years ago, when I was tracking Kjera and traveling south from Luoyang, the same thing happened. That's when I was captured by the Jin army."

Chen Xing's eyes went wide. He'd wondered for a long time how someone as skilled as Xiang Shu could have been captured.

"In an instant, I lost all my strength," Xiang Shu continued, frowning.

"How did you recover?"

"I don't know," Xiang Shu muttered, as if to himself. "Maybe it was your medicine, or maybe I had already recovered before you arrived but I was too weak to break free because the Han didn't provide food or water. I was weak for quite a while after my capture."

He raised his hand and hefted his heavy sword. He managed to raise it, but the movement was visibly sluggish and weak.

“It’s like suddenly, all my strength just dissipated. What’s the matter? Chen Xing, will you calm down?”

“I… Why? What’s wrong with me?” Chen Xing asked, confused. “Do I look like I’m panicking?”

Xiang Shu frowned again. “You look like you’re the one who caught the plague. I managed to recover last time; I’ll recover again.”

Chen Xing calmed himself down a little. “I… I was just a bit scared.” He clung to Xiang Shu’s hand and wouldn’t let go. Xiang Shu studied him for a moment, and gradually, Chen Xing became more composed. “Let’s take a day off and see how it goes.”

As Chen Xing monitored Xiang Shu’s condition throughout the day, he began to suspect the affliction might be some sort of latent illness, and he grew more and more perplexed by it. Xiang Shu didn’t seem to be suffering from the sleepiness and fatigue that Xie Daoyun had described. His expression was normal, only slightly tired. Maybe it wasn’t the plague after all. On the other hand, it was also possible that Xiang Shu’s naturally strong constitution simply made the symptoms of the plague less apparent.

That night, Chen Xing moved into Xiang Shu’s room and slept in the bed with him. When Xiang Shu woke up as usual the next morning, Chen Xing breathed a sigh of relief and immediately checked Xiang Shu’s pulse. It was strong and steady, perfectly normal.

“How do you feel?” Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu sat up and tried to lift his heavy sword. “It’s no good. Wielding it is difficult. If an enemy comes, this will be a problem.”

He exchanged a look with Chen Xing. They were both on edge. “Could it be them?” Chen Xing murmured. “Has Shi Hai’s influence reached Jiankang?”

“Not necessarily. No trouble’s come knocking so far—they probably don’t know that I’m weakened. We’re still in the dark, so we must remain cautious and take this seriously. I’m not convinced by Feng Qianjun’s conclusion about the range of Shi Hai’s powers. Shi Hai wouldn’t give up on the south. He must have had his eye on Jiankang even before the battle at Xiangyang.”

Chen Xing’s original suspicion was that Shi Hai had something to do with the plague. Even if Shi Hai hadn’t come to the south himself or sent any of his lackeys there, Chen Xing had been pretty sure the plague was spread by drought fiends. Yet each new piece of information he received seemed to complicate that picture, and he began to wonder if the plague had less to do with the drought fiends than he thought.

Had he been mistaken from the start? Chen Xing was starting to sense a hidden, unknown danger lying beneath Jiankang’s bustling and prosperous surface. If, in fact, Shi Hai’s subordinates had already infiltrated the Jiangnan region and were plotting to overthrow the isolated Jin court, and if Shi Hai’s plans simply weren’t going as smoothly in the south as they had in the north, then all of the puzzle pieces would fit together.

“You’re right,” Chen Xing admitted. “I let my guard down.”

Xiang Shu nodded. His loss of strength certainly hadn’t diminished his imposing aura. Chen Xing also noticed that while Xiang Shu’s physical strength had been greatly depleted, his mind remained sharp. This was not

the dazed state that people usually meant when they said someone looked like they'd lost their soul.

Chen Xing adjusted the prescription Xie Daoyun had given him. He omitted some of the herbs from her formula and instructed the Xie family to purchase new medicinal ingredients, focusing on enhancing physical strength. As usual, Xie An invited them to eat with him after he returned from court, and over their meal, Chen Xing asked whether there had been any unusual sightings or activities in Jiankang, Danyang, Kuaiji, or Moling over the past year.

"None that I can recall," Xie An replied after some thought. "Why? I heard you visited Daoyun yesterday."

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu had discussed their plans beforehand and decided it was imperative to begin their investigation immediately. "We won't trouble you further in the coming days," Chen Xing explained. "We need to leave soon."

"I sent someone to Kuaiji a few days ago to trace the origins of the Acala Blade's scroll," said Xie An. "They should return in the next day or two. Can't you wait a bit longer?"

"The matter at hand is more pressing," Xiang Shu replied. "We'll leave it for now. Perhaps we'll come across something in Kuaiji ourselves."

Xie An hesitated. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked. "Why the rush?"

Chen Xing didn't doubt his intentions; if Xie An meant to plot against them, he would have already done it. But Xiang Shu's loss of strength was better kept secret, so Chen Xing only said that it was related to

the epidemic. Xie An nodded slowly, accepting the explanation—at which point they were interrupted by the arrival of Xie Daoyun and Gu Qing.

“Feeling better?” Xie Daoyun asked as she entered. She nodded politely to Xie An before approaching to check Xiang Shu’s pulse. Chen Xing caught her gaze and gave her a subtle shake of his head.

“Is Xiang-xiongdi feeling unwell?” Xie An asked.

“No,” Chen Xing said promptly. Xie Daoyun checked Xiang Shu’s condition and was puzzled to find it similar to the previous day: He was not drowsy and showed no signs of the plague.

Before long, more visitors arrived. This time, it was representatives from Dongzhe Bank, but not Wen Zhe; instead, several men came in her place. The Xie household was bustling. The visitors had brought with them a chest full of land deeds. Addressing Xiang Shu respectfully, they said, “Shulü-daren, Madam instructed us to bring you these deeds. The bank truly does not have enough money on hand to cover the amount owed—instead we can offer properties purchased last year in Jiankang, Kuaiji, and other locations as compensation. We hope this arrangement is acceptable to you.”

Xie An was utterly dumbfounded. Chen Xing motioned to him to stay silent and reviewed the deeds. Evidently, Wen Zhe had done the math after their meeting and found that the bank truly couldn’t pay the full amount in cash—or perhaps she simply didn’t want to empty the vault entirely. This was her solution.

“Leave them here,” Xiang Shu said levelly. “How much is left after this?”

The representative bowed. “These properties are valued at one million taels of silver. Dongzhe still owes you a balance of two million taels. Madam requests an extension of six months.”

“Fine,” said Xiang Shu, maintaining his composure. These land deeds demonstrated Dongzhe’s sincerity well enough; there was no need to push too hard.

The representative seemed to have been anticipating this response, because he smiled and promptly brought out a pen and paper. “Then may we trouble you, Daren, for a written note we can bring back to Madam?”

“I, Shulü Kong, have spoken. Does my word not suffice?” Xiang Shu said coldly. “You can leave now, or I might just change my mind.”

The representatives nodded deferentially and fled. As they were leaving the Xie residence, yet another visitor arrived, brushing past the departing messenger. It was none other than Feng Qianjun.

Feng Qianjun, well-informed as always, had clearly heard the news by now. As he entered, he called out, “Xiang-xiongdi, are you all right?”

Everyone in the hall subtly signaled him to keep quiet, except for Xie An, who tried to bolt.

“I’m not here to collect your debt, Xie-daren,” Feng Qianjun snapped impatiently. “I’ll give you another year’s extension!”

An hour later, in Xiang Shu’s room, Chen Xing was busy packing their belongings while Feng Qianjun sat scrutinizing Xiang Shu’s complexion. Xiang Shu frowned. “Why are you here again?”

“How could I not come?” said Feng Qianjun. Having heard the full account from Gu Qing the previous night, he knew trouble was brewing. Early that morning, he had sent people to monitor the Xie residence for updates, and he’d rushed over as soon as Xie An returned from court. “You spend an evening drinking at my place, and the next day, something happens? How dare I not check on you?”

“This has nothing to do with your wine,” Xiang Shu said. “I know that much.”

“You’re heading to Kuaiji now?”

“Yes,” said Chen Xing. “We can’t wait for Xie-shixiong’s news any longer. We need to leave as soon as possible.”

“I’ll go with you,” Feng Qianjun decided without hesitation.

Chen Xing looked at Xiang Shu, who nodded in agreement. Locating Shi Hai was Feng Qianjun’s goal too, and with Xiang Shu in this weakened state, having Feng Qianjun along would make the journey safer.

Feng Qianjun quickly made his preparations, and that afternoon, the three of them set out for Kuaiji.

Several winding subterranean rivers converged in a shadowy underground chamber, their faintly shimmering waters casting an eerie glow as they passed through the lowlands. A sea of strange, luminescent flowers flourished along the riverbanks, bathing the dark space in blue light. The petals of the flowers hosted butterflies with glowing white wings, and these butterflies released a gently luminous powder that drifted toward the center of the floral expanse.

Amid the flowers, on a shallow river shoal, lay a sprawling, intricate formation that spanned nearly an acre. The formation continuously drew energy from the innumerable underground butterflies, and it glowed too; its dark-blue light pulsed weakly, rhythmically. A massive serpent, its head adorned with a sharp, broken horn, rested at the formation's center. Its body was shrouded in tendrils of black mist, its eyes shut tight.

Wen Zhe stood just outside the formation, observing the great serpent. She held a small hand bell in her left hand. "Yesterday, as per your instructions, I amplified the power of the Dragon-Binding Array," she said, her slender brows lifting slightly. "But I fail to see the purpose of it."

"A test," replied the man behind her.

Wang Ziye emerged from the edge of the luminous flower field along the riverside, his silhouette stark against the glowing landscape. Beside him, three black-armored warriors waded through the shallow waters. Their sudden appearance caught Wen Zhe off guard, and she turned to glance back, startled; for all three drought fiend kings to be present at once was unprecedented.

"A test of what?" Wen Zhe pressed further. "The refining is almost complete. Why increase the formation's strength now? Shi Hai-daren, what exactly are you trying to accomplish?"

Wang Ziye casually waved the black fan he held in one hand. "I required the full strength of the array to confirm someone's identity. My suspicions have been proven correct, but we must remain vigilant."

"Is this really necessary? To send *three* of them?" Wen Zhe scoffed. She turned and scrutinized the three drought fiend kings who now stood before her.

“Underestimating the enemy led to the disastrous defeats of Feng Qianyi, Zhou Zhen, and Zhou Yi, and to the loss of two drought fiend kings. My lord has issued a strict order, Wen Zhe. You must be cautious, or you might find yourself capsizing in a ditch.”

“That’s unlikely,” said Wen Zhe. “The resentment that the Soulfall Bell collects is limited. If this continues, the power the Oblivion Flowers are drawing from the earth’s veins won’t last much longer.”

“It’s not a problem. They’re unable to use their full strength right now. Where are they?”

“The exorcist left Jiankang today.”

“I know,” Wang Ziye said languidly. “The facts are almost certain, but it never hurts to double-check. I will go meet with them.”

“Be careful,” Wen Zhe warned him.

Wang Ziye gestured and led the three drought fiend kings away, leaving Wen Zhe to guard the formation. Wen Zhe walked into the Dragon-Binding Array, gently stroking the eyelid of the massive serpent with a soft expression on her face.

Two days later, on the official road from Jiankang to Kuaiji…

“Xiang Shu, are you feeling all right?” Chen Xing asked, glancing at him.

Xiang Shu’s sword was strapped to his horse’s back as he rode through the mountain forest alongside Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun. Spring in Jiangnan had turned the landscape lush and green, and the terraced fields dotting the hillsides gave the scenery a sense of calm and tranquility.

Feng Qianjun slowed his horse and turned to Xiang Shu. “Do you remember when we took this same route to Chang’an? It feels like just yesterday, but a whole year has passed.”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond for a moment. Chen Xing deliberately slowed his pace a little in concern for his health.

“I should have stayed in Jiankang,” Xiang Shu said. “I’ve been holding the both of you back.”

Chen Xing frowned. “How can you say that?”

“I left the magical artifacts in Xifeng,” Xiang Shu said. Before they left the city, he and Chen Xing had temporarily stored the Yin Yang Mirror, the Zheng Drum, and the set of rings in a secret chamber at the Xifeng Bank. In light of Xiang Shu’s depleted strength, they feared that if they ran into something unexpected, they might end up losing the artifacts again. “I’m still uneasy about it, but I’d feel even more uneasy about leaving you to go to Kuaiji alone.”

Feng Qianjun chuckled. “Wow, Xiang-xiongdi, I heard that! So you don’t even see me as a person?”

“Money,” Xiang Shu said flatly.

“Don’t! I’m nobody, Gege! I’ll go on ahead and scout the road for you!”

“It’ll be fine,” Chen Xing told Xiang Shu soothingly. “I can protect you if I need to. My luck has always been good. Just don’t wander too far from me.”

The three of them passed through a narrow gorge. Then, Feng Qianjun, who was leading the way, abruptly slowed his pace. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu halted behind him.

“What were you speculating about earlier?” Feng Qianjun asked. “Chen Xing, you guessed it was Shi Hai who made Xiang-xiongdi sick, right?”

“Maybe,” said Chen Xing, “but we need evidence to confirm.”

“What did Xie An say? What was the matter his people were investigating in Kuaiji for you?”

Chen Xing shot Feng Qianjun a questioning look but didn’t respond. Neither did Xiang Shu.

Feng Qianjun urged his horse onward again. Deeper into the gorge, they discovered a pale corpse hanging from a tree by the stream. The body was dressed in Jin attire, with a waist tag hung on the belt.

The three of them dismounted, and Feng Qianjun took the waist tag from the corpse and examined it. The inscription read, “Official of the Great Jin, Lin, Secretariat.”

Chen Xing stared at the tag. “This is someone from the Secretariat? A subordinate of Xie An? How…how did he end up dead here?!”

Out of nowhere, the corpse’s murky eyes snapped open. It let out a wild roar and lunged toward Chen Xing.

“Watch out!” Even with his strength depleted, Xiang Shu’s reflexes were quick, and he pulled an alarmed Chen Xing away just in time. Chen Xing raised his hand, summoned the Heart Lamp, and struck the living corpse with blinding light. The corpse shrieked in fear. With its neck still tied to the tree, it was unable to escape, but it thrashed wildly. It was a ghastly sight.

From the high cliffs over the canyon, Wang Ziye, who had been sedately watching the scene, let out an amused laugh. Behind him, the three drought fiend kings stood tall, each resting a hand on his sword.

Wang Ziye flicked his fan. “Go,” he said. The drought fiend kings bent their bodies, changed into shadows, and flew off the cliff.

Suddenly, Feng Qianjun’s left hand went to his back and his right to his waist, and he drew both his blades in an instant. Xiang Shu turned and shoved at Chen Xing with his shoulder, and they both rolled to one side.

In the air, the three drought fiend kings drew their swords simultaneously, each with their own target. Before he’d even fully turned around, Feng Qianjun blocked a strike from behind him with his dual sabers. Chen Xing hit the ground from the force of Xiang Shu’s tackle and quickly rolled to dodge the incoming attack.

“Enemy attack!” Feng Qianjun shouted. “You two, go!”

Chapter 56

BUT ALMOST INSTANTLY, Feng Qianjun came close to losing his grip on his dual sabers when he was hit with a monstrous strength that sent him flying backward. Xiang Shu's shoulders hit the ground, and he cushioned Chen Xing while the two of them dodged once, twice, three times, successfully avoiding three attacks in a row.

Chen Xing pointed up at the enemies above him and shouted, "Drought fiend kings!"

Indeed, the ambush was led by the drought fiend king Sima Liang. Sima Yi, the Prince of Changsha, and Sima Ying, the Prince of Chengdu, were trailing him, but Sima Wei was nowhere to be seen.

Sima Liang lunged forward with another strike. Xiang Shu pushed Chen Xing aside and swung his heavy sword with a fluid motion. With his own physical power gone, he took full advantage of the soft technique of borrowing and redirecting his enemy's force. With a single precise thrust that made full use of his momentum, he caught both Sima Liang and Sima Yi's strikes simultaneously, turning and interlocking their blades. The two drought fiend kings' attacks collided cacophonously, and Xiang Shu slipped deftly out of the way.

Feng Qianjun cheered loudly despite his split attention, but Chen Xing could tell that the three of them were outmatched. Xiang Shu came to the same conclusion: A prolonged battle would not be to their advantage. "Let's go!" he said.

He and Chen Xing wasted no time mounting their horses and spurring them into a gallop. Feng Qianjun withdrew his saber, vaulted onto his own horse, and followed. Unexpectedly, the three kings stopped in their tracks.

Still, Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, and Feng Qianjun kept their horses galloping as they rushed out of the valley. Chen Xing couldn't resist glancing backward, and when he saw that the three kings were moving again, climbing onto their own steeds and charging after them, it became evident that their enemies weren't letting them go.

"I'll lead them away!" said Feng Qianjun.

"They're living corpses, not brainless animals!" Xiang Shu said. "They won't fall for your trick!" The horses rushed through a village. Feng Qianjun wanted to head deeper into the town, but Xiang Shu stopped him. "Come back! Don't drag other people into this!"

It dawned on Chen Xing then that if they were to fight in the village, casualties would be inevitable. "What should we do?"

"I don't know!" Feng Qianjun yelled. "Run!"

They fled, their pursuers chasing them relentlessly. Chen Xing's heart was filled with horror. How had the drought fiend kings made their way to Jiangnan? How long had it been since they arrived? What exactly was the goal behind that ambush on the road?

"They're testing me," Xiang Shu said suddenly, between heavy breaths. It was as if he had read Chen Xing's thoughts in the glances Chen Xing kept shooting back at him.

"What?" Chen Xing asked, dazed.

“They’re checking! Whether I’ve already lost all of my ability to fight back!”

He was right, Chen Xing realized—when the three kings revealed themselves, they had focused on exchanging blows rather than immediately killing them. They were confirming whether Xiang Shu could still fight back!

“They want to capture Chen Xing,” Xiang Shu said. “Feng Qianjun! We need to split up!”

“Draw them into the graveyard!” Feng Qianjun called back. “I need resentment to use the artifact!”

They passed through several towns. It was almost Qingming, the tomb-sweeping festival, and many commoners had arrived in Jiangnan with bamboo baskets to pay respects to the dead at their ancestral graves. Feng Qianjun led Xiang Shu and Chen Xing on a meandering route through the foothills, and when they arrived before a hilly range, they broke through the boundary of the graveyard and stormed into the forest of graves within.

“You guys need to leave quickly,” Feng Qianjun said. “I’ll bring up the rear. We’ll regroup in Kuaiji. Don’t worry about me! I know Jiangnan like the back of my hand!”

Many of the ordinary people in the graveyard were standing up and giving Feng Qianjun strange looks. “Run quickly!” Chen Xing shouted to them. “Leave this place!”

The drought fiend kings arrived not a moment later. Sima Liang was the first to rush in, and when the commoners saw this black-armored warrior astride a huge horse, they panicked and fled, screaming, toward the

exit of the graveyard. Feng Qianjun breathed in deeply. He held the Harmony Saber in both hands, its blade wreathed with incorporeal black qi.

A flock of crows flew by under the pale canopy of the sky, and Xiang Shu looked sharply at the horizon. Chen Xing sensed it too: Shi Hai was watching them.

Xiang Shu swiftly abandoned his horse, grabbed Chen Xing, and pulled him along in a sprint into the forest.

Chen Xing tried to protest. “Feng-dage—”

“He’ll be fine!” Xiang Shu yelled. “Their target is you!”

Chen Xing remembered his encounter with Sima Wei. Sima Wei had ignored the rest of the group, fixated solely on kidnapping Chen Xing back to the Central Plains by any means necessary. That, too, had been Shi Hai’s command.

Shi Hai was no longer focused on Feng Qianjun, or even Xiang Shu. He had his sights set on Chen Xing.

“You were originally an exorcist who exorcised yao and slew evil,” Sima Liang observed, “but now you wield a demonic weapon and control resentment. When did you join our side?”

“Apologies,” Feng Qianjun replied in an even tone. “I’m just forced to make do with your method for the time being—so that I can repay you in full!”

With that, Feng Qianjun channeled the resentment permeating the graveyard into his Harmony Saber. He bent his arm and slashed once, twice, three times, unleashing three onslaughts of blade qi that shot forth like an

arrow, gathering black qi as they flew and coalescing into what looked like a solid mass.

The three kings swiftly blocked the qi with their swords and emerged unscathed. But wherever the blade qi landed in the forest surrounding them, it charred the flora, turning it charcoal black—and extended grasping, vinelike tendrils toward the three kings. In a flash, the once-lush greenery around them turned as barren as if a cloud of flames had ravaged the area. As the radius expanded and more trees were consumed, more and more branches whipped toward Sima Liang, Sima Yi, and Sima Ying.

Chen Xing rushed out of the forest, pulling Xiang Shu behind him. When they finally stopped, Xiang Shu planted his sword in the ground for support, panting harshly. When they'd first changed course and used the cover of the trees to escape, Xiang Shu had been leading Chen Xing, but eventually, the tables had turned, and Chen Xing had been forced to grab Xiang Shu's wrist and drag him along with him.

"I can't run anymore," Xiang Shu gasped. "I need to save my energy…but they will catch up to us eventually. I can hold them off for a bit. You need to go, quickly."

"I… Where can I run to?" Chen Xing asked incredulously. Looking at the road in front of him, he realized that they had already entered the bounds of Kuaiji.

"They want you," Xiang Shu said. "I don't know why Shi Han wants to capture you, but you must not fall into his hands! Go! You have to leave now!"

He turned his back on Chen Xing and faced the forest with his sword held in a two-handed stance. Chen Xing looked at Xiang Shu and paused for a few seconds, thinking deeply. Then he turned and ran onto the public road.

Despite the decrease in his physical strength, Xiang Shu felt that his mind was abnormally clear. Shi Han's underlings had shown their faces almost as soon as something happened to him—that proved that all of this had been carefully orchestrated.

There was a massive roar in the distance. It sounded like an avalanche had occurred somewhere around the graveyard. He didn't know how much longer Feng Qianjun could delay their enemies.

Once again, crows began to flock about him—many more of them this time. Xiang Shu slowly backed up, warily watching crow after crow land around him, enclosing him in some odd array. Xiang Shu swiped his sword at them and managed to startle a few into flight, but no sooner had they left than more crows arrived to fill in the gaps. Soon, he was surrounded by almost a hundred crows, making for a very strange picture indeed.

Then a sudden, loud shout came from behind Xiang Shu.

"Heya!"

A burst of light from the Heart Lamp startled the murder of crows into breaking their formation. A horse galloped to Xiang Shu's side with Chen Xing on its back, holding the reins. "Good news! I found an outpost over there! I bought this horse from them! Having money is awesome! Come on, get up here!"

Xiang Shu shook himself out of his shock and climbed onto the horse, barely managing to sit securely on its back.

Chen Xing turned the horse around, angrily shouting into the woods, “Shi Hai, you bastard! You can play with your birds by yourself! We won’t be joining you!”

Xiang Shu had nothing to say to this. Chen Xing didn’t waste any more time. He spurred the horse around again and rushed onto the public road, escaping with Xiang Shu.

A few breaths later, Sima Liang and Sima Yi ran out of the woods, but all they saw of Chen Xing and Xiang Shu were two little black dots steadily shrinking in the distance.

Wang Ziye stepped out of the forest behind them.

“They managed to run faster than I expected,” he said. “Never mind, there’s no need to chase them. Even if they flee to the ends of the earth, they can’t escape my grasp. The Dragon-Binding Array has served its purpose, and Shulü Kong is no longer a threat. Take a shortcut to get to Kuaiji before they do, and await their arrival. Kill Chen Xing, but make sure Shulü Kong stays alive so that he can hand over the artifact. You are to settle this matter today, once and for all.”

The drought fiend kings turned to look at him. With an imperious hand gesture from Wang Ziye, they moved as he commanded.

“Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing said, turning his head to look behind him. “Are you all right?”

Xiang Shu's large body was half-collapsed on Chen Xing. With great effort, he straightened up and said, "I won't die."

Chen Xing had already lost Xiang Shu once. He was afraid that if they kept running, Xiang Shu would fall off the horse, so he grabbed both of Xiang Shu's hands and secured them around his own waist. Then he covered the backs of those hands with one of his own to ensure that Xiang Shu was holding onto him tightly. Xiang Shu said nothing about this.

"That time back in Xiangyang," Chen Xing said. "I'm sorry about that!"

"What?"

"I won't lose you again!"

Chen Xing urged the horse forward, glancing back every now and then. When he saw that the three kings weren't giving chase, he finally relaxed.

"Xiang Shu?" Chen Xing asked. He turned his head again and met Xiang Shu's complicated expression. Stiffly, Xiang Shu turned his own head away.

"I have to find a way to regain my strength," Xiang Shu said. "I don't know what Shi Hai slipped me or what magic he managed to cast, but on this journey from Jiankang to Kuaiji, I've been feeling more and more powerless."

"It's getting worse?" Chen Xing asked, surprised.

Xiang Shu nodded. "It isn't poison. I don't think that he had an opportunity to feed me the Demon God's Blood, even when I wasn't paying attention."

A thought came to Chen Xing. “Between yesterday, when you became aware of the abnormality, and when we left Jiankang this afternoon, your symptoms didn’t worsen. Is that right?”

“Yes. What’s your point?”

“But as we traveled to Kuaiji, your body became weaker and weaker. Correct?”

Xiang Shu made an affirmative hum. “Maybe it has something to do with martial techniques.”

Chen Xing continued to urge the horse forward. “Is it possible that… they’ve set up an array somewhere to seal your power? But where would they have concealed it?”

Chen Xing’s guess, though wild, was not far from the truth. Unfortunately, the urgency of their situation left no room for further contemplation. As nightfall approached, the gates of Kuaiji loomed in the misty twilight.

Chen Xing galloped until his breath came in ragged gasps, but when they finally reached the city gates, there wasn’t a soul in sight, not even a guard. Xiang Shu surveyed their surroundings, his brow furrowed in deep concern.

“What should we do now?” Chen Xing asked, turning to Xiang Shu. “Are you hungry?”

Xiang Shu looked flabbergasted. “Can’t you think of something yourself? If one day you don’t have me by your side anymore, will you just have no more plans?”

“Why are you being so mean all of a sudden?” Chen Xing wasn’t expecting to be scolded for his question—but honestly, when he thought about it from Xiang Shu’s perspective, it did seem fair. Ever since he met Xiang Shu, he really had stopped thinking for himself. With every move and every step, he found himself instinctively turning to Xiang Shu and asking, *What should we do next?*

“Oh,” Chen Xing said. “But I do occasionally act on my own.”

The peace was broken the moment the words left his mouth, and a flicker of anger sparked to life in Xiang Shu’s eyes. “Besides sneaking out in the dead of night to journey north, what other ideas have you ever had?”

For some reason, Xiang Shu felt disheartened seeing Chen Xing like this. During their recent skirmish, he had risked his safety to stall their pursuers and let Chen Xing escape…but even if Chen Xing had escaped and reached Kuaiji alone, he’d have had no idea what to do next without Xiang Shu’s input. The realization made Xiang Shu’s eyes darken. What on earth was going through Chen Xing’s head?

“We should find a place to hide and wait for Feng-dage to rejoin us, right?” Chen Xing said.

“Do you even need to ask?!”

Xiang Shu was concerned about Chen Xing’s survival, but Chen Xing assumed Xiang Shu was just agitated because he’d lost his power. “Shifu said that people always think that things will happen exactly as planned, but there’s no such thing as a plan that goes off without a hitch,” he said, trying to reassure Xiang Shu. “Most plans get messed up at some point—you can’t plan for the whims of fate. Relax, they won’t catch me.”

“They *will* come again,” Xiang Shu insisted, “so before they do, we need to devise a countermeasure. We don’t want to alarm anyone, so we should start by entering the city and finding Kuaiji’s Prefectural Governor.”

Chen Xing had almost forgotten the reason they were there: to investigate the cause of the plague and to verify the origin and contents of that bamboo slip. They set off together toward the manor of the local authorities.

With Xie An’s letter in hand, they had no trouble gaining an audience with the county official. Chen Xing explained their purpose to Kuaiji’s Prefectural Governor, whose name was Wu Qi.

“So the imperial court has finally taken note of these matters,” he said with a sigh.

Chen Xing was about to explain that their investigation had nothing to do with the imperial court, but then he thought better of it. No need to make things complicated. “Does the first person who was confirmed to be infected with this disease currently reside in Kuaiji?”

The governor ordered his men to retrieve the household register so that he could confirm. “Yes, the individual in question remains bedridden. He’s a traveling merchant who contracted the illness during a trip to Mai City last year. Upon his return, he sought treatment from every doctor in the city, but none of them detected any ailment. Soon, however, rumors spread among the citizens that Mai City was afflicted with a ‘corpse-changing plague’ and that this merchant had brought the ‘corpse poison’ back with him, thus spreading the plague. Fortunately, knowledgeable individuals intervened, and now the rumors have died down. The city officials set down an order, too, and things have gradually calmed.”

“Let’s go check out the situation tomorrow,” Xiang Shu said to Chen Xing.

“Okay.” Chen Xing thought of the citizens who had been infected with this plague. They became muddle-headed when night came, but their spirits were better at noon.

“Ah, right,” Wu Qi said. “Several days ago, Xie-daren sent someone over to inquire about a specific scroll. The messenger left the city early this morning. Did you happen to pass him on the road?”

Chen Xing stared at him. Xiang Shu reached out and pressed the back of Chen Xing’s hand under the table to calm him down. With a trembling voice, Chen Xing asked, “Was…was his surname Lin?”

“Yes, exactly. Lin-daren from the Secretariat.”

It was confirmed, then. That corpse had been the messenger. Chen Xing decided not to say anything about it just yet. “I must write a letter,” he said. “Please send it back to Xie-daren in Jiankang immediately.”

It was clear that Wu Qi sensed something was amiss, but he didn’t inquire further, merely fetched a brush and paper for Chen Xing to write with. Suddenly, Xiang Shu asked, “Was the messenger carrying any documents with him?”

“Of course not,” Wu Qi replied, sounding a little surprised. “His directive was simply to review the historical records of several of the city’s prominent aristocratic clans from three hundred years ago.”

Chen Xing’s right hand shook the entire time he was writing. The messenger had definitely found some vital information, but he’d left behind no hint as to what it was. Had the drought fiend kings interrogated him? What had the messenger told them?

“What did he find out about their circumstances?” Xiang Shu pressed.

Chen Xing’s movements stuttered a little. He admired Xiang Shu’s ability to stay calm and logical even when faced with such a complicated problem.

“Reportedly, this bamboo slip originated from one of the families residing in this county. It’s said that the manor this family bought belonged to a distinguished aristocratic clan in Kuaiji over a century ago.” Wu Qi smiled a little. “Rumor has it that they were descendants of the Xiang family of Kuaiji, the very lineage of Xiang Yu, who competed for the throne against Emperor Gaozu of Han, Liu Bang.”

Xiang Shu looked surprised. A high-pitched buzzing sound filled Chen Xing’s ears, sounding strangely distant for something that was coming from his own head, and he felt the world tilt on its axis. “Where is that family now?” Chen Xing asked.

“They live under the shade of the mountains on the west side of the city, in the largest manor next to a small creek bridge covered by willows. However, that family is one of the ones that’s been struck by the plague. Lord Lin also made a special trip to visit them, which delayed his return by a few days.”

Chen Xing met Xiang Shu’s eyes and thought for a moment. Then he finished his letter and said, “Please send this letter to Jiankang tonight.”

“Well, the two of you have traveled so far to get here, so why don’t __”

“No,” Xiang Shu said bluntly. “We’ll find our own place to stay, but we may have to trouble you again in a few days.”

Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu didn’t want to create more trouble for others. There was no sign of Feng Qianjun yet, and if the drought fiend kings chased them into Kuaiji, the guards under Wu Qi’s command wouldn’t be able to stop them. More drought fiend chaos would only harm the local citizens.

As night fell, the two of them left the governor’s manor and walked onto the main street. Xiang Shu was watching Chen Xing suspiciously, his breathing heavy. “I remember you once said…”

“Yes,” Chen Xing murmured. “I did say that the Xiang family of Kuaiji was very famous. Xiang Yu raised a militia to fight against the Qin Empire in Kuaiji, so the entire Xiang family resettled here. But…why was that bamboo slip found here?”

Chen Xing looked up at Xiang Shu, his eyes filled with doubt. When he’d mentioned Xiang Shu’s family name way back when, it had just been an offhand remark. But that remark had turned out to be prophetic. It seemed the Xiang family had something to do with the origin of the Acala Blade bamboo slip.

Xiang Shu didn’t respond. He kept his head down, thinking, as they walked down the street.

“We need to find a place to stay first,” Chen Xing added. “Then we can lay out the details of the entire affair properly.”

The whereabouts of the Dinghai Pearl, the slip about the Acala Blade, the sudden emergence of the drought fiend kings, the spread of the plague, and Xiang Shu’s history… It was all becoming more and more impenetrable. Still, Chen Xing felt certain these five matters were all

closely linked. If he could tug on one of the threads, the entire tapestry would begin to unravel.

“Maybe it’s a coincidence that their surname also happens to be Xiang,” Xiang Shu said. “They probably don’t have a strong connection with my mother.”

Chen Xing disagreed. “It’s too great a coincidence, in my opinion. First, Zhang Liu had been to Carosha, and so had your mother. Next, we found the Acala Blade in the Yin Yang Mirror, and the record pertaining to it came from the Kuaiji Xiang family—”

Xiang Shu’s eyes went suddenly wide.

“What? What did you think of?”

Instead of responding, Xiang Shu shoved Chen Xing protectively behind him, snapping Chen Xing out of his thoughts and back into the present. It was only then that Chen Xing noticed it: Resentment was flooding onto Kuaiji’s main street, so thick it almost looked like a tangible object. It poured in from both ends, rushing toward the center where the two of them stood.

On the north side of the street, in front of Xiang Shu, two drought fiend kings, Sima Yi and Sima Ying, stepped out of the dense resentment. Behind Chen Xing, on the south side, emerged Sima Liang.

“I remember you once mentioned,” Xiang Shu said in a low voice, “that Sui Xing will always save you.”

“Technically, that’s correct,” Chen Xing said.

“So no matter how dangerous the situation is, you’ll survive.”

“It *should* work that way…but it’s still better not to court death. Let’s think of a way to escape, since we really can’t beat them.”

“You’ll definitely be able to escape. Follow me, find an opening, and take care of yourself.”

“No! Wait!”

But it was too late. Dragging the Acala Blade behind him, Xiang Shu flung himself at Sima Yi and Sima Ying.

Chen Xing had no choice but to follow Xiang Shu, wielding the Heart Lamp as they attempted to break through the drought fiend kings’ blockade. A realization soon dawned on him: The dense aura of resentment around them functioned similarly to a defensive array. Its oppressive force was dimming the Heart Lamp’s light.

Even with his full strength, defeating three drought fiend kings at once would have been a challenge for Xiang Shu, so what were his odds now, when he couldn’t even wield his sword? Yet Xiang Shu knew that no matter the cost, he had to ensure Chen Xing could get to safety. He threw his weight behind the sword and launched a ferocious slash at Sima Yi.

Unfortunately, Sima Yi knew about Xiang Shu’s weakened state. He grabbed Xiang Shu by the throat, slamming him against the wall and delivering a crushing blow with his shield. With a splintering noise, the wall split open, and Xiang Shu let out a strangled shout as the blow drove all the air from his lungs. The pain was unbearable, but he held tightly to the heavy sword and didn’t let go.

Chen Xing pointed a finger in Xiang Shu’s direction, and the Heart Lamp flared to life, breaking through the darkness. The two drought fiend kings swiftly dodged to either side and flanked Chen Xing. Behind him,

Sima Liang had already drawn his bowstring. Chen Xing turned around and raised his hands, his eyes opening wide.

“Where’s your Sui Xing?” Xiang Shu croaked. A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth. He pushed himself upright with difficulty and scanned their immediate surroundings. His gaze settled on a nearby house, and he tried to calculate whether he could escape by taking Chen Xing and crashing into it.

“Sui Xing, come out!” Chen Xing cried. “Or else I’m really done for!”

Sima Liang let the arrow fly. The other two drought fiend kings lifted their swords and slashed at Chen Xing, ignoring Xiang Shu completely. But before they could cut off Chen Xing’s head—before Chen Xing’s words had even stopped echoing—

—a black shadow darted in from a rooftop.

All of the resentment on the street began to gather around that black shadow…which turned out to be a mask-wearing youth who didn’t quite come up to Chen Xing’s elbow. He zipped by and let out a wolf howl.

“Xiao…Xiao Shan?!” Chen Xing exclaimed. How was Xiao Shan here?!

Xiao Shan’s two claws seemed to have hooked onto the tangible resentment swirling under the blackness of the night. He pulled it toward himself and then released it in a vicious strike, breaking both Sima Ying and Sima Yi’s swords and shields at once.

Sima Ying and Sima Yi flipped in midair, narrowly avoiding the full force of Xiao Shan’s Sky-Rending Claws, but one of the claws still

managed to graze Sima Ying’s shoulder. It sliced his pauldron clean off with chilling ease.

Xiao Shan was wearing a ghost-face mask and a set of dirty hunting robes, with a bandana tied around his neck. “Chen Xing!” he shouted. “Go!”

Without saying another word, Xiang Shu grabbed Chen Xing and crashed into the house. They ran to the backyard, shoved open the gate, and rushed out the other side.

Xiao Shan’s eyes went bloodshot as he turned and leaped onto the roof. When the three drought fiend kings on the street below caught up to him, they saw Xiao Shan turn and leap off the roof and up into the air. Without so much as a backward glance, Xiao Shan unleashed a devastating claw attack that sliced off half the roof. The house collapsed, trapping the drought fiends in its rubble, and with another elegant leap, Xiao Shan made his own escape and ran after Xiang Shu and Chen Xing.

Chapter 57

ANOTHER SILHOUETTE came sprinting along the street toward the scene, shouting, “Monsters! Monsters!”

The moment he entered the city, Feng Qianjun had noticed the resentment in the southern part of the city and rushed over to help. Between his shouting and the commotion Xiao Shan caused, they woke the entire street. As lanterns lit up all through the area, the three drought fiend kings burst through the tiles, turning into black flames and flying away.

Panting and helping Xiang Shu along, Chen Xing staggered toward the east of the city.

“Chen Xing!” Xiao Shan’s voice rang out. He sounded furious. “Chen Xing!”

“Xiao Shan…” Chen Xing turned back to look and, seeing Xiao Shan on all fours racing through a small alleyway toward them, stopped in his tracks. When Xiao Shan caught up to Chen Xing and Xiang Shu, he blocked their way forward, his face filled with rage. He looked at Chen Xing without speaking. Chen Xing was exhausted.

Xiang Shu frowned. “You were supposed to stay in Karakorum. Why did you follow us here?”

Too angry for words, Xiao Shan let loose a yell and leaped forward like a whirlwind to hit Xiang Shu.

“No, stop!” Chen Xing said hurriedly. “Xiang Shu can’t fight with you right now! Xiao Shan, it’s so great you’re here!” Xiao Shan shoved

Chen Xing aside and took a few steps back. Chen Xing didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "How did you find us?"

Xiao Shan stayed stubbornly silent even as his eyes grew watery. Chen Xing turned around again, checking to see if the drought fiend kings had returned, before busying himself with supporting Xiang Shu. "Come with us, Xiao Shan! We have to leave! This place is dangerous!"

The three of them ducked under a bridge. As Chen Xing took a moment to examine Xiang Shu's wounds, Xiang Shu let out a tired sigh, closed his eyes, and otherwise remained perfectly still. Off to the side, Xiao Shan watched the two of them with suspicion.

"Are you okay?" Chen Xing asked Xiang Shu.

"My heart is tired." Xiang Shu had been heavily injured by the drought fiend kings; blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth. He had definitely sustained internal injuries. Even breathing was hurting him.

Anxious, Chen Xing turned to look at Xiao Shan. "We need to find a safe place, or we'll have to leave Kuaiji quickly."

Under the cover of night, the city was quiet. The silence was only broken by the occasional bird call—until suddenly, they heard the sound of footsteps on the bridge.

"Chen Xing!" Feng Qianjun's voice shouted.

Chen Xing stuck his head out from under the bridge and shushed him. Seeing him, Feng Qianjun sighed in relief and clambered down to join them.

"Our pursuers have all run away," Feng Qianjun said, "and all the citizens on the street are now awake and walking around. Xiang-xiongdi,

how are you? Let's get up, and we can head over to my family's bank to pass the night… Oh? Who's this?"

Chen Xing gestured impatiently—there was no time to explain. Xiang Shu's condition seemed to be worsening, and Chen Xing needed a way to at least temporarily send Xiang Shu back to Jiankang. He couldn't stay in Kuaiji any longer. As important as their task was, it wasn't as important as Xiang Shu's safety. They could always return to investigate later.

Feng Qianjun slung Xiang Shu's other arm over his shoulder, greatly lightening Chen Xing's burden. They hurried out from under the bridge and were greeted by the quiet residences of the eastern part of the city. After a year of plague-induced suffering, the houses looked gloomy, crushed in body and spirit. Under the wolf star, which rose at around midnight, their surroundings seemed as serene as a ghost city.

"We need to pass through the main street," Feng Qianjun said. "If we hurry north, it'll take us at least two hours, but we should reach Xifeng Bank before sunrise…"

"Wait," Chen Xing said, remembering what Wu Qi had told him. The old Xiang family home was located on the river bank near the willow bridge, the very bridge they had hidden under. "Come with me."

Chen Xing arrived at the entrance to someone's home and knocked. A lantern hung by the door with the words "Fang Manor" inscribed on it, and to the side of the door was a peach-wood sword used to ward off evil spirits. The owner of this manor was named Fang. The family had once been a large one, but when the owners and their gaggle of children all caught the plague, they'd dismissed most of their servants and spent a lot of

their wealth. For a while, they'd thought they had nothing more to do but to wait for death, but this illness had left them stuck halfway, and now all they could do was keep going, day after day.

Now, a single elderly servant and a younger member of the Fang family sat across from Chen Xing. Chen Xing explained his situation: He was a passerby, and his companion was sick; they were hoping to borrow a room and stay the night. Hearing this, their hosts readily agreed and went to tidy up a guest room. Feng Qianjun tried to give them some silver, but the Fang family refused to accept it. Their patriarch was bedridden from the plague, so if others who were ill came along, he wanted to help as much as he could. Small acts of kindness were good in times like these.

Chen Xing checked Xiang Shu over. He was bleeding internally, his organs having sustained damage during the clash with the enemy. Thankfully, the wounds weren't major. Chen Xing used a silver needle to open up Xiang Shu's meridians, and soon enough, Xiang Shu took a turn for the better and sat there in his usual silence.

"Why did you pick this place specifically?" asked Feng Qianjun. "Is there something special about it?"

Chen Xing explained everything that had happened in Kuaiji. Xiao Shan didn't bother paying attention to any of that, choosing instead to sit on the side of the lounger opposite Xiang Shu, staring off into space. Sitting across from each other like that, one large and one small, they glared at each other with mutual distaste.

Feng Qianjun thought for a moment. In the silence, Xiang Shu finally spoke. "I trusted you. Who was it who said Shi Hai's grasp wouldn't reach as far as Jiangnan?"

Feng Qianjun groaned. “How could I have known? There was no indication this would happen!”

“How did they know we left Jiankang to come to Kuaiji?” Chen Xing asked. “They even managed to guess what route we’d take.”

There was only one road coming down south from Jiankang, so setting up an ambush on that one path was not difficult. The more important question was how the three drought fiend kings had snuck into Jiangnan so easily. Did they have someone aiding them inside the city of Jiankang? Chen Xing kept mulling the question over, but he had no clues to work from.

Feng Qianjun checked the windows and the doors again, closing all the ones it was possible to close. While he was at it, he took the opportunity to check if there were any crows in the Fang manor. “Once it’s light outside,” he said, “I’ll send the housekeeper to the local Xifeng branch with a letter. I’ll also make a trip to the governor’s manor, and with the addition of the troops they send, we should be able to find those three dead people. The three of you should stay hidden to prevent the drought fiend kings from discovering us.”

Chen Xing thought that their safest option right now was to seek the help of the governor, but he was afraid of the drought fiend kings causing even more chaos. If this devolved into another Chang’an, he would only have himself to blame. One point in their favor, however, was that they now had another strong fighter on their side in addition to Feng Qianjun: Xiao Shan. If they prepared carefully, they might be able to fight the drought fiend kings on equal footing.

“Xiao Shan, are you able to use the Sky-Rending Claws now?” Chen Xing asked.

Xiao Shan didn’t look at him. He was curled up on his side in the corner of the couch, sneaking occasional glances at Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun, but whenever Chen Xing spoke to him, Xiao Shan’s gaze turned away.

Feng Qianjun was desperate for Chen Xing to explain where this boy had come from. “When did you two have a kid? He has the exact same attitude as Xiang-xiongdi.”

“Enough,” Xiang Shu growled. He was in no mood to play into this farce.

Just then, a voice called to them from outside the door. “Do you require any medicinal supplies? I saw that that fellow seemed to be hurt.”

What great timing! Chen Xing opened the door to give his thanks and found it was the young man from earlier. “I was just thinking of requesting some medicine to improve blood circulation,” he said. “If you have some, we would greatly appreciate it.”

The owner of the Fang manor had tried every method under the sun to treat his illness, so he had all sorts of medicinal supplies. He had also asked the servants to maintain the stock on a daily basis. The young man picked up his lamp and brought Chen Xing into the storehouse to find him the ingredients.

“To be honest with you, I’m actually a doctor,” said Chen Xing. “When the master of the house is awake tomorrow, I’d like to examine him.”

“Then I really must thank you,” the young man said. “That xiongdi of yours is very handsome. How did he get so terribly wounded?”

In his heart, Chen Xing lamented the cruelty of life and all of these events that were too long and complicated to explain. Maybe tomorrow, he would let Feng Qianjun send Xiang Shu go back to Jiankang while he and Xiao Shan stayed to continue investigating. Xiao Shan’s claws seemed pretty powerful, so he could be helpful…

Wait, wasn’t this the manor the Xiang family used to live in? Chen Xing had almost forgotten. “I heard that your family sold off some old things when they first came here,” he said. “Was that true?”

That young man was surprised by the sudden subject change. “Two days ago, we had a Lin-daren from the Ministry of Internal Affairs asking the same thing. What connection do you have with him?” Chen Xing took out Xie An’s letter, and the young man read it by lamplight.

“This manor originally belonged to the Xiang family,” he told Chen Xing when he’d finished reading. “By the time we moved here, the Xiang family had already died out, so the prefectural governor took the manor back to resell it. That’s how our master got his hands on it. To tell you the truth, my family’s master and mistress have been sick for so long, the household affairs are a mess. We didn’t have silver taels to spend, so we had to find some items to exchange for money. I saw that the edge of that bamboo slip was inlaid with gold, so I thought that it would be worth some __”

Chen Xing resolutely interrupted him. “When you guys first cleaned out this manor, did you find anything else?”

“We stored all of those old belongings on the east side. If you want to go take a look, I can take you there, but don’t say I didn’t warn you… Are you afraid of ghosts?”

Chen Xing didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Let’s go.”

“I’m serious. Sometimes when I come to this yard in the middle of the night, I hear people talking. You have to believe me.”

As they crossed to the other side of the manor, Chen Xing realized that this place was huge, and a lot of the buildings hadn’t been properly repaired. In the darkness of the east garden, he saw that the old columns, beams, and doors of the abandoned building there had rotted away. It stood lifelessly in the dark, looking for all the world like it was filled with hungry ghosts—but even like this, Chen Xing could see glimpses of the golden splendor and glory of hundreds of years past.

The yard hadn’t been locked up—no one would burgle a family with the plague—so Chen Xing only had to push the door open to get in.

“I’m heading back to rest for a bit,” said the young man, who was evidently not the bravest sort. “If you need anything, feel free to call for me.” He put the lantern down on the table and hurried off.

“It would actually be great if there were ghosts,” Chen Xing muttered to himself. “I could at least get some clear answers that way.”

Chen Xing set the lantern on an abandoned cabinet that leaned crookedly to one side, then used the Heart Lamp to light up the four corners of the room. This room had originally been an elegant lakefront pavilion where the owner received guests. Inside stood several bookcases with shelves piled haphazardly with scrolls, many of which were decaying.

Chen Xing picked up a bundle of bamboo slips that were still tied up. The string holding the bundle together had rotted, and as soon as he opened it, the slips fell to the ground with a clatter. Chen Xing bent over to pick one up and saw a line of text written on it: “The Compendium of the Spiritual Qi of the Earth.”

Chen Xing’s hypothesis had finally been proven right: The Xiang clan was a family of exorcists! He immediately opened another bundle and pulled out the first slip, which greeted him with the words “Ten Spiritual Sites.”

“What are you looking for?” asked Xiang Shu’s voice from behind him.

“Ah!” Chen Xing yelped. Xiang Shu blinked, and Chen Xing tried to regain his breath. “You… Why did you come here?”

Xiang Shu frowned. “I was afraid you’d gotten yourself kidnapped again!”

“Even if the drought fiend kings did show up to kidnap me, it’s not like you’d be able to stop them,” said Chen Xing. “You should go back and rest.”

He didn’t mean anything by it, he’d just been gently ribbing him, but Xiang Shu’s expression darkened instantly. He was so angry that he was shaking, but the thought of arguing with Chen Xing here never occurred to him. “You’re right,” he muttered. “I’ll be leaving, then.”

Chen Xing could tell that his careless words had hurt Xiang Shu. “I didn’t mean that,” he said hurriedly. “I’m sorry, Xiang Shu… Shulü Kong!”

Xiang Shu turned to leave. For some reason, looking at his figure from behind made a deep sadness well up in Chen Xing’s heart.

“Xiang Shu,” he said. “Listen to me, Xiang Shu… Come here and look at what I found…”

Xiang Shu ignored him and made to leave without another word—until Chen Xing stepped around in front of him to stop him. He wrapped his arms around Xiang Shu’s waist and didn’t let go.

Xiang Shu stiffened, startled and uncomfortable. He wanted to yank himself away, but he didn’t have the energy in his body to pull free; he had no option but to let Chen Xing manhandle him for once.

“L-let go!” he barked, flustered. “What are you doing?! Get off!” He pushed at Chen Xing’s head a few times, but he couldn’t move him.

Chen Xing tilted his head to lean it against Xiang Shu’s shoulder, feeling both sad and touched. He was sad that he’d wounded Xiang Shu’s heart with a callous remark while Xiang Shu was in this weakened state. He was touched that even when Xiang Shu couldn’t protect himself, the thing he cared about the most was Chen Xing’s safety.

“Sorry,” Chen Xing murmured. “I’m sorry. Thank you, Shulü Kong.”

“It hurts!” Xiang Shu said impatiently, though his expression betrayed his dismay. “Let go! Are you trying to get your revenge on me?”

Chen Xing finally let go of him. They stood face to face, but both awkwardly averted their gazes as if they didn’t want to see each other. In truth, they each feared exposing their inner thoughts.

Finally, Xiang Shu broke the silence. “What are you searching for here?”

“Eh, I…” Chen Xing was still running on adrenaline. In the depths of this dark night, the understanding suddenly settled over him that there were

deeper, more complicated feelings lurking between the lines of those ancient tomes' stories of exorcists and protectors.

"You'd better sit there and not move," Xiang Shu said. "If you move, then when I recover my strength, you'll be the first one I teach a lesson to."

Despite his threat, Xiang Shu was still a little unsteady as he walked off to the side, where he looked up to see the bundles on the bookshelves. Chen Xing had no choice but to sit down right there in the dusty room. He was still reeling from that moment of intense emotion, and spurred on by a swell of impulse, he shouted in his heart, *Shulü Kong, you bastard! You're really good! I like you so much!*

Xiang Shu looked up, puzzled. Chen Xing looked away, and without his say-so, the Heart Lamp illuminated. He didn't know why, but it seemed to be reacting to his emotions tonight, its light surging brightly and endlessly through all the cracks of the ruined house. It lit up the inside of the room like it was daytime.

"Stop that," Xiang Shu scolded him, frowning. "Do you want to draw all the enemies down on us?" Chen Xing quickly retracted his magic, and Xiang Shu added seriously, "Using your mana will cause harm to your body. Can't you rein it in a little?"

"Oh, I just wanted to give you some light." But the truth was that Chen Xing was feeling all warm and fuzzy now. He found himself possessed by an almost uncontrollable urge to wield the Heart Lamp in order to express the feelings in his heart.

They sank into another period of silence. Xiang Shu picked up the bamboo slip that Chen Xing had first looked at.

Strange, Chen Xing thought as he watched him study it. *I thought Xiang Shu couldn't read seal script.*

Just as he suspected, Xiang Shu failed to make out anything from the slip. Xiang Shu straightened up, moving on to investigate the bookcases. Instead, he created a mess, as if he, too, was using his movements to announce the emotions within his heart.

Chen Xing couldn't watch any more of this. "The family that used to own this place were exorcists," he explained. "It seems like this was their specialty, studying the flow of the world's spiritual qi and spiritual sites where those veins intersect… What are you searching for? Bring it over here, and I'll read it for you."

Xiang Shu, who had finally regained his calm, replied, "I'm searching for the clan register."

Understanding dawned on Chen Xing. "You think your mother was part of this family?"

Xiang Shu did not reply. Instead, he breathed in deeply, enduring the dull pain of his injury, and pulled down a box from the tallest part of the bookcase. He opened the box and withdrew a yellowing silk scroll.

Chen Xing made a sound of surprise and stood up. Xiang Shu was already spreading the silk scroll open on the table, and Chen Xing used the Heart Lamp to light up the scroll. He looked at the tiny words scrawled on it. They were all names.

"Is this a Han-style family register?" Xiang Shu asked.

"No, this is… This is a list of people who passed the Exorcism Department's test and took up the duties of exorcists."

The document traced hundreds of years of the Xiang family's glory, ever since the founding of the Han dynasty. Among the exorcist families, the Xiang family really was a famous line. Looking at all of these lineages, Chen Xing remembered the volume of his own sect line, which recorded the deeds of his exorcist ancestors.

Before every name, the document listed the year they entered the Exorcism Department; after the name, it recorded the artifacts they wielded. Beginning in the Yimo year, when the Han dynasty was founded, a Xiang family descendant passed the test every few years. This continued until the Han Emperor Wu, Liu Che, took the throne and established the usage of era names. Those were the Jianyuan years, when a lot of young exorcists qualified at once.

Xiang Shu went through everything, line by line. Chen Xing meant to tell him that the scions of the Xiang family had already become sparse hundreds of years ago, but only checking the family register could confirm it—but suddenly, Xiang Shu began to tremble. His face turned deathly white, his breathing sped up, and his gaze, like that of a drowning man, fell on one line of words:

"First Year of Yongping: Xiang Yuyan, Soulfall Bell."

"First Year of Yongping, three hundred…three hundred and seventeen years ago," Chen Xing said, dazed. "Three hundred years ago? Three hundred years!"

Chapter 58

"IT MAY NOT be the same person," Chen Xing said as he paced around the room. "Maybe it's just someone with the same name? Xiang Shu…"

But Xiang Shu was overwhelmed, unconsciously gripping the silk scroll, his forehead drenched in sweat. If his mother truly had been around three centuries ago, then what did that make him?! He exchanged a glance with Chen Xing, and his intense unease was clear in his eyes. Chen Xing tried to comfort Xiang Shu with the possibility of a coincidence, but deep down, they both knew the truth.

The journal entries Zhang Liu had left in the Yin Yang Mirror, the origins of the Acala Blade bamboo scroll, and the whereabouts of the Dinghai Pearl—all of these seemingly unrelated mysteries now appeared to be interconnected, tied to a young Han exorcist named Xiang Yuyan. And this woman was likely Xiang Shu's mother!

"In here?" Feng Qianjun's voice suddenly called out.

Xiang Shu and Chen Xing both jumped, shouting in alarm—which startled Feng Qianjun in turn, and he yelled too. It was a cacophony. Xiao Shan stood silently nearby, watching their antics with a deeply unimpressed expression.

It was the dead of night. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan had come searching for them. First Chen Xing left with the young man who'd knocked on the door, then Xiang Shu followed—and neither returned. Feng

Qianjun and Xiao Shan had been left alone in the room, staring at each other in awkward silence. No matter what Feng Qianjun asked, Xiao Shan refused to respond. The eerie mansion was making Feng Qianjun uneasy, besides. It reminded him of ghost stories from his childhood—tales where people sought shelter during a storm, only for their companions to vanish inexplicably one by one. It was profoundly unsettling.

“Don’t scare us!” Chen Xing exclaimed when he saw Feng Qianjun.

“You’re the ones who scared me!” Feng Qianjun shot back angrily. “You’ve been gone for so long! It’s already the third watch, and you still weren’t back!”

Xiao Shan walked into the room and curiously inspected his surroundings. Chen Xing was gasping for breath, and Xiang Shu’s expression could hardly have looked worse.

“What did you find?” Feng Qianjun asked. “Let me see!”

Chen Xing began to explain, but when he came to the subject of Xiang Yuyan’s identity, he hesitated. This was Xiang Shu’s lineage, and Xiang Shu’s business. He intended to gloss over it, but Xiang Shu interjected:

“She’s my mother.”

Feng Qianjun grasped the sensitivity of the matter immediately. “Your mother lived for over three hundred years?” he asked, his voice wavering. “That’s…quite impressive. Exorcists… Mm, are all exorcists able to live that long?”

Legends often spoke of immortals who lived for centuries, even claiming lifespans equal to the heavens and earth themselves, but these

were merely tales; no one had ever witnessed such phenomena firsthand. It was barely plausible at best.

Xiang Shu thought about his mother. “She didn’t seem like someone who was three hundred years old,” he mused. It was commonly believed that someone with such longevity would have temperament and wisdom far beyond their appearance. Even if an eighty-year-old bore the face of a twenty-year-old, for example, their demeanor and behavior would unmistakably reflect their true age.

“What about this Soulfall Bell?” Feng Qianjun asked, puzzled.

“It’s a magical artifact,” Chen Xing explained, recalling what he’d once read about it. “It has the ability to absorb two of the three immortal souls from humans, beasts, or yao.”

“So…wouldn’t that kill them?”

Chen Xing waved his hand dismissively. “Humans are born with three immortal souls: the heaven soul, the earth soul, and the human soul. Losing the heaven soul results in death. The earth soul governs sensory perception and mental faculties, and the human soul is responsible for memory. As long as the heaven soul remains intact, a person can survive temporarily even if the other two are lost. I’ll explain more later—Xiao Shan! Don’t touch that!”

Xiao Shan was too short to reach the top shelf. Whether he was bored and curious about the uppermost items or simply trying to make some noise to remind everyone he was still there, he had extended a claw and pulled the entire bookshelf down. The room was instantly engulfed in a cloud of dust.

Chen Xing quickly motioned for Xiao Shan to come over to him, but Xiao Shan pushed him aside, looking displeased. He pointed at his ear, then

at a hidden doorway that had been revealed by the fallen bookshelf. He raised his foot and kicked the door open, gesturing for them to follow.

"What is it?" Chen Xing asked. Behind the door lay a narrow path leading to the depths of the residence's rear garden. The path was overgrown with weeds, having been neglected for nearly a century. It was almost the fourth watch now, and the world was eerily silent. As they watched, the moon emerged from behind the clouds, casting its glow over the twisted trees and dense underbrush. Chen Xing looked at Xiao Shan. "Did you hear something?"

Xiao Shan remained silent, but Chen Xing knew that Xiao Shan's hearing was far sharper than his own, Xiang Shu's, or Feng Qianjun's. Without uttering a word, Xiao Shan used his claws to clear away the obstructing foliage.

"Let me handle it," said Feng Qianjun.

Chen Xing shot Xiang Shu a questioning look, silently asking whether he intended to stay behind or follow. Xiang Shu folded away the silk scroll and stood up. Feng Qianjun reversed his grip on his blade, which still had faintly visible remnants of malice clinging to its edge—residue from their previous skirmishes that had yet to dissipate completely.

As they approached, the dead trees lining the path seemed to wither and draw back to either side, revealing a hidden trail. A faint breeze carried the eerie, indistinct voice of an elderly woman, whispering, "Stay here… Stay here… Don't leave…"

"A ghost?!" Chen Xing felt a chill run down his spine, and he glanced at Feng Qianjun in fear. But Xiang Shu put a hand on his shoulder, bypassed Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan, and stepped deeper into the garden.

The elderly woman's voice came again. It was filled with agony. "Don't go… Stay here… Don't leave…"

A gust of wind blew, and the clouds obscured the moon once more. Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun shivered with fear, and Chen Xing grasped Xiang Shu's hand, abandoning all his earlier bravado about not being afraid of ghosts. "How about we h-head back now? And come back during the day?" he suggested, his voice trembling.

"What are you afraid of?" Xiang Shu frowned, gripping Chen Xing's hand tightly and intertwining their fingers. "You're not afraid of the drought fiends, but you're afraid of a ghost?"

Chen Xing let out a desperate wail. "It's just that it's so late, and we can't see anything! It's terrifying, aaahhh—"

"Heart Lamp!" Xiang Shu tightened his hold further, and the warmth of his hand helped calm Chen Xing slightly. Shaking with fear, Chen Xing summoned the Heart Lamp, flooding their surroundings with a stark, blinding light.

The light revealed a bleak scene: an ornamental mountain, and beside it, a swing hanging from a tree, gently swaying in the wind. The sound of the swing only made the scene even more frightening. The Heart Lamp's illumination also seemed to summon the elderly woman's voice. It grew louder. "Don't go! Stay!" it screamed.

Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing felt their souls leave their bodies, and Chen Xing quickly hid behind Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu paused, but Xiao Shan, seemingly undeterred, walked toward the ornamental mountain.

"Don't go…" the voice gasped weakly once more. Xiao Shan tilted his head and pointed his claws to the ground beneath the swing in front of

the ornamental mountain. That seemed to be where the voice was coming from.

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I’ll take a look.”

The four of them approached the ornamental mountain, and Xiao Shan used his dragon claws to dig down into the earth. Beneath the ground, the voice continued to cry, “Stay… Stay with me…”

Feng Qianjun was losing his composure. “I think we should wait until sunrise to dig, Xiaoxiongdi! Please stop!”

“What if we dig up a corpse in the middle of the night?!” Chen Xing added. He couldn’t bear to look any longer, unable to keep the image of an old woman buried alive out of his mind, her vengeful spirit lingering.

Xiang Shu, however, paid them no mind and got digging alongside Xiao Shan. They were less than a foot deep when they heard the clink of Xiao Shan’s claw hitting something metallic.

Terror struck the hearts of Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing. Feng Qianjun said, “I’ll head back first—!”

“It’s not a coffin!” Xiang Shu snapped impatiently. Xiao Shan pulled a palm-sized copper box out of the dirt. Chen Xing stared at it, bewildered.

When Feng Qianjun saw that it wasn’t a corpse, he finally breathed a sigh of relief. The voice of the old woman was coming from the box. “Stay… Stay…”

Feeling a bit better, Chen Xing took the box, which had a copper lock on it. Xiao Shan placed it on a stone beside the ornamental mountain and used his claws to break the lock. Chen Xing gestured for everyone to step back, then moved forward to open the box.

Xiang Shu looked at him in disbelief. “What happened to you being scared?”

Chen Xing shrugged. “It’s not a ghost…so it’s fine.”

“What if there’s a ghost inside?” Feng Qianjun asked, crossing his arms.

Chen Xing gave him a determined look. “Then…if I see it for real, I won’t be scared. I’ll open it. You all be careful.”

“Let me do it,” Feng Qianjun said. Using the edge of his sword so as to avoid any hidden traps, he gently pried open the box. The lid flipped open with a snap. Inside, the box glowed faintly.

It held a dry, withered flower, with a butterfly resting on its petals. The butterfly fluttered its wings gently. The dim blue light was coming from its wings.

The butterfly made a faint sound: “Stay…”

Chen Xing blinked at it, astonished, and the rest of the group frowned at the strange scene.

“What is this?” Xiang Shu asked skeptically.

“I don’t know,” Chen Xing said, looking at it in confusion. “Should we take it back to study? Xiao Shan, don’t touch it!”

Xiao Shan ignored him and reached out with his claws to grab the butterfly, but Xiang Shu snagged his wrist and held him back. The glowing butterfly seemed unbothered. It flapped its wings and flew out of the box, circling the group and then slowly flying higher, leaving a trail of glowing dust in its wake.

“It’s going to fly away!” Feng Qianjun shouted.

Reacting swiftly, Xiang Shu reached out and pinched the butterfly's wings between his fingers to prevent it from escaping. As soon as he caught it, however, the butterfly transformed into motes of light and vanished with a flash that illuminated the entire dark garden.

All around them, the withered trees came back to life. The courtyard filled with the sound of flowing water, and countless memories rushed toward them, pulling them back to the Xiang residence of three hundred years past.

Dressed in her martial attire, Xiang Yuyan sat on the swing, gently swaying with the breeze. A man walked into the garden, and Xiang Yuyan glanced up briefly before they both promptly averted their gazes.

“The old lady has lived a long life and has a stubborn temperament,” Xiang Yuyan said softly. “Don’t take her words to heart, Liu-ge.”

This Liu-ge was none other than Zhang Liu. He turned slightly and walked a few more steps in the garden. His face was pale, with a few wisps of beard on his chin, and his features were exquisite; the word “beautiful” hardly did him justice. If not for his tall stature and the scholar’s robe he wore, people might have mistaken him for a woman.

“Of course I won’t take it to heart,” he said. “It’s just that… I thought the Xiang family would be more reasonable. But now, it seems you’re the one caught in the middle. It’s fine, I’ll find another way.”

“Liu-ge!” Xiang Yuyan stood up from the swing, but then she hesitated. When Zhang Liu turned around, she asked nervously, “Are you really going to do this?”

Zhang Liu’s only response was a gentle smile.

“This is madness,” Xiang Yuyan muttered, “absolute madness. Do you even understand the consequences of what you’re about to do?”

“The world’s spiritual energy will disappear,” Zhang Liu said evenly. “There will be no more yao, no more demons, and no more exorcists. The human world will return to being just that—human.”

Xiang Yuyan remained silent.

“Cultivators possess such great power. If things continue as they are, who will be able to keep them under control? Mara is reborn once every thousand years, and for the sake of that once-a-millennium catastrophe in the Divine Land, we keep exorcists alive. But if exorcists go down the wrong path, what will we do? I fear that before Mara returns, the Divine Land will be destroyed by the hands of the exorcists themselves.”

Xiang Yuyan frowned. “Liu-ge, you’re always like this. Why do you always have to see the worst in people?”

“The Exorcism Department in Chang’an is facing the risk of a schism right now,” said Zhang Liu. “Do you really think it’s so improbable? Exorcists are divided between Hu and Han, but there should be no such division when it comes to capturing demons. Ordinary people still have the law and the Department to restrain them, but once the Exorcism Department splits, who will enforce order?”

“Let’s put aside everything else,” Xiang Yuyan said seriously. “The mere act of taking away the world’s spiritual power will turn you into the enemy of every exorcist under the sun.”

“So what? By then, I’ll already be gone. Yuyan, you know better than anyone how important this is.”

Xiang Yuyan seemed to become flustered. “Liu-ge,” she said, “do you truly believe that we can eliminate the Demon God with nothing but the Dinghai Pearl and the Acala Blade?”

“Many paths in this world are lined with thorns. All we can do is our best. Knowing it’s difficult shouldn’t stop us from trying.”

Suddenly, they both stopped talking and looked toward the entrance of the garden, where an elderly woman stood. She looked furious.

“Da-mu,” Xiang Yuyan murmured softly. Zhang Liu gave a slight bow before turning and walking away.

In the Kuaiji region, the term “da-mu” was used to address one’s grandmother. The matriarch of the Xiang family now walked toward Xiang Yuyan. “Tell Zhang Liu to leave tomorrow,” she said coldly, “and don’t let him stay in the Xiang residence any longer!”

Xiang Yuyan wanted to argue, but she sighed softly instead.

“Still not willing?” the old woman said spat. “Listening to that man will only lead the Xiang family to ruin!”

Xiang Yuyan paused for a moment. “Da-mu,” she said, “subduing demons and exorcising evil is the mission of people like us. I’m going with Liu-ge to slay the Demon God, isn’t that—”

“Do you think this is just a trip to Chang’an or Luoyang?” the old woman interrupted, her voice like ice. “You’re going back to three thousand years ago!”

These words were like a thunderclap in Chen Xing’s mind, but the conversation that followed between the grandmother and granddaughter left him no time to dwell on their meaning. He found himself gripped, listening to the flood of information whether he liked it or not.

“Zhang Liu’s plan is clearly doomed to fail!” the old woman was saying, gripping her cane with fury. “When Mara appears, the Heart Lamp will emerge alongside it. The Heart Lamp and the Acala Blade depend on each other, but you don’t have the Heart Lamp. How can you recklessly go back to three thousand years ago to slay demons without it? You’ll never succeed!”

“But Liu-ge also said that if we return to the Battle of Muye,[3] Chiyou will have been weakened by Xuanyuan-shi, and with the power of the Dinghai Pearl, there will still be hope for success. If we do succeed, we’ll break the curse that has been hidden within the Divine Land for thousands of years.”

“Stay,” the old woman commanded. “Stay here, Yuyan, don’t go!”

Xiang Yuyan avoided her grandmother's gaze, her eyes betraying her reluctance. "Da-mu," she said slowly, "I remember you telling me that the greatest regret of your life was parting with Da-fu… You once said that one day, you would—"

"Enough!" the old woman shouted sharply. "I will not let you go with Zhang Liu!"

The old woman's agitation had driven her into a fit of coughing. Xiang Yuyan rushed over to support her and help her go back inside.

Suddenly, the garden experienced a rapid shift through the seasons. The spring flowers withered and fell, and the air was overtaken by a flurry of snowflakes. Among the layers of illusions, Xiang Yuyan walked into the garden dressed in a plain white robe and carrying a sword box on her back. In the midst of the harsh winter, her beauty seemed even more striking. Her brows and bone structure bore a faint resemblance to Xiang Shu's.

A piece of black gauze, a sign of mourning, was pinned to the sleeve cuff of her drab martial robe.

"Are you ready?" It was Zhang Liu's voice. Zhang Liu himself followed shortly after, tall and imposing as he entered the garden dressed in the attire of the northern nomads.

"Here's the Acala Blade, Liu-ge," Xiang Yuyan said, placing the box flat on a stone table and opening it. Inside was the longsword that Xiang Shu had taken from the Exorcism Department. "Don't you want to take a look? This is the divine weapon my grandfather used when he was alive."

"Let's keep it in the Yin Yang Mirror for now," Zhang Liu said. He summoned the mirror and used it to store the sword. "I brought all the

heavenly-grade artifacts with me. Thanks to my position, I have a bit of a knack for acquiring public resources for personal use."

Xiang Yuyan smiled helplessly. As she did, the garden around them seemed to come alive with spring once again. Then Zhang Liu lifted his hand again…and a brilliant, glowing pearl appeared in his palm.

Chen Xing felt as if all the blood in his body had turned to ice. The pearl emitted a powerful light, but the exact details were hard to make out.

"Is this the Dinghai Pearl?" Xiang Yuyan asked, clearly seeing it for the first time herself. She reached out to touch it, and as she did, the light it gave off grew even brighter.

"Yes," Zhang Liu replied. "This is the 'core' of the Divine Land we live in. As for this golden ring, I call it the Tide Ring. Time is like the sea, and the years are the tide. Next, we must find a spiritual locus, a place rich in spiritual energy, where it will be easy to take in the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth. Then we'll find another spot to set up a formation—we'll use the wheel inside the pearl, which corresponds to the vein of the earth, to reverse time. Time will flow backward, and the cycle of fate will start anew."

Xiang Yuyan stared in awe at the Dinghai Pearl until Zhang Liu put the treasure away, signaling that they could leave.

"There's still something I need to do," Xiang Yuyan said quietly. "Please give me a little more time."

Zhang Liu gestured for her to go ahead, so Xiang Yuyan took out a small bronze bell and held it in her hand. She handed Zhang Liu a box. When Zhang Liu opened it, he found a flower inside.

Zhang Liu's brow furrowed. "Yuyan, you…"

“Let this butterfly stay in my homeland,” Xiang Yuyan said as she raised her head, gazing at the snowflakes drifting through the sky. “Let my memories fall like snowflakes and stay here forever, never to depart again.” She gave the Soulfall Bell a gentle shake, producing a soft ringing sound.

Xiang Shu’s eyes went wide. A faint light emanated from Xiang Yuyan’s body, and a glowing butterfly emerged from within her. It fluttered its wings and flew toward the Soulfall Bell. Holding the bell gently, Xiang Yuyan gracefully transferred the butterfly to the flower inside the box.

When Zhang Liu closed the box, there was a hint of melancholy in Xiang Yuyan’s eyes.

“The Divine Land of three thousand years ago is still the Divine Land,” Zhang Liu said. “The people who live there are no different from you and me.”

“I know,” Xiang Yuyan replied softly. “But we will never return again. I want to bury the memories of the Xiang family here, as a part of my three immortal souls and seven mortal forms, to sleep together with the land.”

She buried the box in the earth. Then she stood up and left with Zhang Liu.

The white light suddenly retracted and vanished, leaving only the four people standing in the garden. Chen Xing instinctively looked up at Xiang Shu.

With the crow of the rooster, the sky gradually brightened. The dark, claw-like shadows in the rockery and the desolate garden slowly receded, as

though a black cloth that had veiled Chen Xing’s eyes was now lifting and falling to the ground. He and Xiang Shu were still holding hands.

Xiang Shu tightened his grip on Chen Xing’s fingers, breathing lightly, as if they had just awakened from a dream of a life lived three hundred years ago.

Chapter 59

IT WAS DAYBREAK in the guest room. “It’s as Lu Ying hypothesized,” Chen Xing said. “Once he obtained the Dinghai Pearl, Zhang Liu used it to suck in all of the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth and took Xiang…Xiang-qianbei with him to kill the Demon God.”

“Three thousand years.” Feng Qianjun was in a state of shock. “This artifact allows people to travel through time to three thousand years in the past?”

Zhuyin was the dragon god of causality and spacetime. Legend claimed that the legendary wheel of the heavens and earth rotated under Zhuyin’s power, and it was under the rotation of that vast wheel of time that years passed and seasons changed. The Tide Ring of which Zhang Liu had spoken corresponded precisely to the cycle of the world’s divine vein. His objective had been to turn back time and return to the conclusion of the Battle of Banquan with Xiang Xuyan, where they could use the Acala Blade to destroy all remnants of the Demon God.

“It’s clear what happened next,” Chen Xing said. “For some reason, Xiang Yuyan-qianbei arrived three hundred years in the future instead, and she decided to stay in the north. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Xiang Shu still didn’t say anything. He couldn’t keep himself calm now that he’d seen the fragments of memories that the Soulfall Bell had stored in this place. His mother was one of the ancients from three hundred years ago!

Guessing that Xiang Shu needed a moment to digest this information, Chen Xing stroked the back of his hand and stopped talking about it. This revelation was beginning to unravel the mystery of Xiang Yuyan, but more pressing questions had emerged.

Xiang Yuyan had arrived alone beyond the pass, so where did Zhang Liu go? What happened to the Dinghai Pearl? And why did Xiang Yuyan, who'd decided to travel three thousand years into the past with Zhang Liu, instead find herself in Chi Le Chuan three hundred years in the future?

For the moment, everyone forgot that the drought fiend kings were chasing them. Contemplative silence filled the room. Chen Xing mixed the medicine for Xiang Shu and, when it was done simmering, handed him the bowl. "Drink this medicine first. We've found an important clue, but we still haven't escaped the danger."

Xiang Shu barely managed to nod. They'd all spent the entire last day and night running for their lives, and they were exhausted. Feng Qianjun didn't even bother taking off his robes before he lay down on the ground and fell asleep, and after a while, Xiang Shu slumped on the bed too.

Chen Xing reached out for Xiao Shan, wanting to hug him. Xiao Shan acted reluctant at first, as if still angry, but he caved in the end, crawling over to lie down at Chen Xing's side. Chen Xing stroked his head. Before, there had been too many other things to take care of, but he could finally have a proper talk with Xiao Shan now. Except…what should he say? There wasn't much he *could* say at this point.

"A boat," Xiao Shan said suddenly. "I came on a boat."

"What?"

Xiao Shan sounded unhappy. “I came from Goguryeo to Jiangnan on a boat.”

Chen Xing sat bolt upright, realizing in surprise that Xiao Shan was responding to the question he’d asked ages ago about how Xiao Shan had gotten here. “You’ve learned how to speak the Han language?” he exclaimed.

“Yeah, so what?” Xiao Shan replied sullenly.

Chen Xing was gobsmacked. Though their time together in Karakorum had been brief, Chen Xing had managed to teach Xiao Shan a lot of words. Xiao Shan just hadn’t had much opportunity to practice before Chen Xing was kidnapped. When Xiang Shu returned to Karakorum to gather his belongings, he’d entrusted Xiao Shan to the care of the Xiongnu chief and then mounted a swift horse and rode off to rescue Chen Xing without even a proper farewell.

Xiao Shan slept at Karakorum for several days as the Xiongnu used their herbal medicine to treat his external wounds. The moment he regained consciousness, he rushed after Xiang Shu to find Chen Xing. At the beginning of his journey, all Xiao Shan could say was “Chen Xing, Chen Xing,” but as he met more people, he learned a lot of new words. He retained a lot of what Chen Xing had taught him, too; children picked up new languages quickly, after all. By the time he arrived in Goguryeo, he could already carry on basic conversations, and after learning that Xiang Shu and Chen Xing were taking a boat down to Jiangnan, he too found a vessel and snuck on board.

The captain of that boat, a Han, quickly discovered his little stowaway, but seeing Xiao Shan’s striking features and the evident

intelligence in his eyes, the captain decided against throwing him into the sea to feed the fishes. Xiao Shan also carried several valuable accessories of the Xiongnu tribe, so the other people aboard speculated that he was no ordinary person. At the beginning of the trip they tied him up loosely with some rope, and by the end of the trip, the captain was seeking him out for conversations to stave off boredom.

The more he spoke, the more Xiao Shan's vocabulary increased. His accent carried a hint of the soft Suzhou dialect. He could ask for directions; he could buy food; he knew how to arrange to stay at inns and even how to exchange money at pawn shops. Not seeing someone for a day was like being separated for three autumns; time flew faster when you were apart. After nearly half a year away from Chen Xing, he'd grown a head taller, nourished well by the food on the boat. When he finally reached Kuaiji, he'd begun to inquire about Chen Xing and Xiang Shu's whereabouts.

Chen Xing sighed. "You… You actually…"

"I'm angry! Angry at you!" Xiao Shan raged. "You don't want me anymore!"

Hastily, Chen Xing shushed him, not wanting to wake Xiang Shu and Feng Qianjun from their deep sleep. Wrapping Xiao Shan up in his embrace, Chen Xing stroked his head gently, then licked the top of it. Then he released him, watching him with a smile.

"It wasn't that I didn't want you," he murmured. "I was captured, wasn't I? You knew that. I was actually trying to find time to send a letter to outside the pass to bring you over here."

Chen Xing knew perfectly well that Xiao Shan was upset because he'd vanished just like that and left him alone in Karakorum. But what

could he have done? They had to let bygones be bygones.

Chen Xing's smile faltered, and he felt tears prick his eyes. Meanwhile, Xiao Shan was so angry he was almost in tears. He lay sprawled on the ground like a starfish, his limbs spread out and the dragon claws still on his hands, tossing and turning in the throes of his tantrum.

"Shh! It's all right, you're here now," Chen Xing said. Xiao Shan finally turned his head to look at him. Chen Xing looked back at him and said in a tiny voice, "There are still more than two years left… Xiao Shan, it's not that I don't want to take care of you."

Xiao Shan didn't understand, and Chen Xing struggled internally, trying to decide whether he should reveal the reasoning behind his decision. Ultimately, he decided against it. Not even Xiang Shu was aware of the truth, so what was the point of telling Xiao Shan?

But then Xiang Shu raised his head, his brows knit, and asked, "Two years left of what?" Evidently, he hadn't actually been asleep.

Chen Xing opened his mouth to say *it's nothing*, then realized this would only make Xiang Shu more suspicious. "I was saying that it would have been more than two years still before I returned to Chi Le Chuan to get him," he said.

Xiang Shu said no more, simply lay back down and let out an exhausted sigh.

"Go to sleep, Xiao Shan," said Chen Xing. "We can talk more when you wake up. You must be tired too."

He stroked Xiao Shan's forehead. Xiao Shan finally quieted down, giving Chen Xing one more spiteful kick before burrowing into his embrace.

“Oh,” Chen Xing said. “You’ve grown so much taller so quickly.”

At Xiao Shan’s age, children grew at an astonishing rate. Like new bamboo shoots in early spring, they seemed to be taller with each passing day. One day, Chen Xing mused, this Xiongnu boy could be taller than Xiang Shu. When he grew taller than Chen Xing, how would it look for him to still be clinging to Chen Xing in his sleep like this? Chen Xing decided it was best to take this opportunity to adjust Xiao Shan’s sleeping position; he laid Xiao Shan flat on the ground instead of letting him sprawl on his own shoulder to sleep.

Xiao Shan let sleep take him, and soon, silence blanketed the room. Everyone else fell asleep too; after a whole day and night of running for their lives, they were all understandably exhausted. It wasn’t until the sun had risen to the height of three bamboo poles that the owner of the house finally awoke and sent people to invite Chen Xing to join them for lunch.

Chen Xing’s eyes were still hazy with sleep, but he woke everyone else in time. When they entered the dining hall, they discovered that there were still a good number of people at the Fang manor. Wives and concubines with entire herds of sons and daughters sat in the hall, all still caught in the muddled grasp of sleep. Their eyes were empty of spirit, and they seemed to barely manage to muster enough energy to duck their heads and eat their congee.

Xiang Shu sat quietly drinking his medicine. His body had recovered a little, and it seemed like he was turning something over in his mind. After eating, Feng Qianjun rose to get ready to return to Xifeng Bank.

The owner had spoken weakly when he greeted them, and his voice was just as weak when he spoke to the old housekeeper now. “Which of

them is the renowned doctor?”

This was the first plague patient Chen Xing had seen. The symptoms were clearly different from Xiang Shu’s. “I am,” Chen Xing replied, rolling up his sleeves. “Let me take a look at you.”

Chen Xing had already questioned the young man they’d met the previous night, so now he merely took the Fang family patriarch’s pulse. After a careful examination, he discovered that the situation was exactly as Xie Daoyun had described: The pulse was normal, and nothing else was out of the ordinary.

“Think back to when you first contracted the illness. Did you see any people or eat anything weird?” Chen Xing asked. “Was there anything you remembering feeling was strange?”

The man had been infected the year before, and the memories he endeavored to recall were hazy.

Xiang Shu was drinking his medicine, looking thoughtful. He waited until he’d put down the medicine bowl to ask, “When you first got ill, did you hear the chime of a bell?”

Chen Xing looked sharply at Xiang Shu. The chime of a bell? The Soulfall Bell? Suddenly, many of the plague’s symptoms became clear to Chen Xing. Plague victims were described as being in a dazed state, as if they’d lost a part of their soul… Wasn’t that a perfect description of someone who’d had one of their immortal souls forcibly drawn out?

“A bell?” said the Fang family head. “I don’t remember clearly…”

Xiang Shu turned to Chen Xing. “The night you got drunk, I remember hearing the sound of a bell.”

“In Jiankang?” Chen Xing let go of the family head’s wrist, having finished taking his pulse. “Why didn’t I hear it?”

“You were so drunk you couldn’t think straight. Of course you didn’t hear it.”

Feng Qianjun chose that moment to return. “You’ve figured something out? Let’s go back to Xifeng and discuss it there.”

Chen Xing took a moment to placate the Fang family for a bit, informing them that it might not be long before they saw results, and they should remain in Kuaiji and continue taking their medicine. In the meantime, Feng Qianjun arranged for a carriage, fearing their enemies’ return. He had Chen Xing, Xiang Shu, and Xiao Shan climb into the carriage from the backyard.

“I paid the children in the city to mobilize,” Feng Qianjun added. “They all have slingshots, and as soon as they see a crow, they’ll pelt it with rocks. We don’t know if the drought fiend kings are still hiding inside the city, but this should at least delay them returning to seek revenge.”

Before Xiang Shu got in the carriage, he cast one look back at the entrance to the Fang manor, a hint of loneliness in his eyes.

The carriage wobbled as it rolled down the street. Xiao Shan yawned, evidently not fully awake yet, then curled up in the carriage and went back to sleep. Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu, knowing he must still be thinking about what had happened last night. Just as he was about to open his mouth and spout a few consoling platitudes, Xiang Shu spoke. “Did the Heart Lamp find me only because I was also born from a family of exorcists?”

Chen Xing contemplated this for a moment. “I don’t know, Protector, but the more I think about things, the more I understand that some things are fated to be. Your…great-grandmother also said that the Heart Lamp and the Acala Blade go hand in hand. Maybe that’s why we met?”

“The first time I saw that blade, I sensed something familiar about it. As if it was calling to me.”

Chen Xing smiled brightly. “Then I guess I know for sure that you really do want to be my protector now.”

This made Xiang Shu frown a little. “What I’ve done on this trip hasn’t been enough proof of that?”

“I’m grateful for it,” Chen Xing said hastily. “I didn’t mean anything by that. As for the whereabouts of the Dinghai Pearl, we still need to…”

He trailed off, and they both fell silent for a while. It occurred to Chen Xing then that ever since Sima Wei kidnapped him at the foot of the Yin Mountains, Xiang Shu had become extremely protective. His gaze rarely strayed far from Chen Xing.

“Kjera is heading north,” Xiang Shu said suddenly. “What do you think he’s looking for?”

It was a good question. Chen Xing considered it. “Is he searching for your mother?” he wondered. “What happened to Zhang Liu is unclear, but your mother ended up three hundred years in the future, and Kjera has traveled to the north multiple times… Has he been tracing your mother’s whereabouts?”

From this perspective, Shi Hai and company might have also been looking for the Dinghai Pearl. Did they know about Zhang Liu’s plan?

Three hundred years ago, had the two sides crossed paths? Had there been a confrontation?

“The Yin Yang Mirror was originally in Zhang Liu’s hands,” Xiang Shu said, “but we first saw it in—”

“In Feng Qianyi’s hands!” Chen Xing realized. “Yes, Shi Hai and his team must have found Zhang Liu! They thwarted his plans!”

The carriage delivered its four passengers to their destination, the Xifeng Bank. Excepting Xiao Shan, who kept sleeping without a care in the world, they each took a moment to change into a fresh set of clothes. Then Chen Xing waited until everyone had sat down to drink tea before beginning to organize his thoughts from last night.

“First of all, Zhang Liu left Kuaiji with the Dinghai Pearl,” Chen Xing said. “They must’ve fought with Shi Hai and lost, or the Yin Yang Mirror wouldn’t have ended up in Shi Hai’s hands.”

Feng Qianjun made a sound of agreement. “The goal of Shi Hai and his people is to revive Chiyou, so that makes a lot of sense.”

After a moment’s thought, Xiang Shu added, “Maybe that encounter is the reason my mother was sent three hundred years into the future.”

With this suggestion, everything fell neatly into place. “But where is the Dinghai Pearl now?” Chen Xing asked.

“Not in Shi Hai’s hands, I think,” Feng Qianjun said. “If he had that kind of powerful artifact, he would’ve annihilated everything by now.”

“And not with my mother,” said Xiang Shu, “since she didn’t bring it with her. I’m certain of that.”

Chen Xing frowned. “Could it be that Zhang Liu is dead, but he managed to hide the Dinghai Pearl somewhere before he met his end to prevent it from falling into Shi Hai’s hands?”

“Do you remember those three maps?” Xiang Shu asked.

Chen Xing pulled out the maps in question. The first one was of Carosha, which could already be ruled out from the list.

“Oh?” Feng Qianjun said. “Isn’t this the map of the Altar of the Seven Stars from Mount Nanping?”

Xiang Shu and Chen Xing both stared at him. “Why didn’t you say so earlier?!” Chen Xing demanded. He wanted to beat Feng Qianjun to death.

“You guys never asked me!”

Xiao Shan, rudely awakened from his sleep, flipped over and furiously shushed at them. “Shh!”

“Didn’t you see it that day at the Exorcism Department?” said Xiang Shu.

“I just didn’t think about it much at the time!”

“Shh! Shh!!!”

Chen Xing finally complied, lowering his voice before saying, “Wait, let’s think this through. What do each of these three maps mean? Carosha is the location of the Dinghai Pearl, so Mount Nanping…should be the place to cast spells.”

“Correct,” Feng Qianjun said thoughtfully. “It’s said that Mount Nanping is a blessed spot and the place where Kongming cast magic to borrow the eastern wind.”[4]

“He was an exorcist too?” Xiang Shu didn’t understand much about the Han people, but even he had heard of the renowned Zhuge Liang.

“Maybe?” Chen Xing waved his hand. “That isn’t important. In any case, the second location—Or, actually, can you take another look at the third map? Is it maybe in Jiangnan?”

“I really don’t know about that,” said Feng Qianjun.

“You’d better not wait for another year and a half before telling me you suddenly remember,” Xiang Shu warned him.

“If you say it like that,” Feng Qianjun agonized, “then even if I did remember, I’d be too scared to tell you!”

In the memories Xiang Yuyan had left behind, Chen Xing recalled, Zhang Liu had specifically said “we must find a spiritual locus…to take in the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth.” Mount Nanping, then, could have been the blessed spot where he used the Dinghai Pearl to absorb all the spiritual qi. This left them with the third location: the place where Zhang Liu and Xiang Yuyan set up an array and activated the Dinghai Pearl to send them back to the coordinates of the same array three thousand years in the past.

They could probably skip going to Mount Nanping, since the most important thing was to determine that final location, but if there were traces of Zhang Liu and Xiang Yuyan’s movements at Mount Nanping, it wouldn’t exactly hurt to go take a look. It wouldn’t be a good idea to leave the city without authorization, though; the issue of the plague remained their top priority.

When Xiang Yuyan left, she took the Soulfall Bell with her. If Shi Hai had acquired the Yin Yang Mirror, they could more or less assume he

had the Soulfall Bell, too. This artifact, which could draw an immortal soul out of a living person with a single shake, was potent, but Chen Xing was not the least bit afraid. If Xiang Shu's hypothesis was correct, Shi Hai and his group had already tried to use the Soulfall Bell on him and Xiang Shu, but Chen Xing remained perfectly fine, and although Xiang Shu was experiencing some strange side effects, his three immortal souls were still fully intact. All he'd lost was his physical strength.

Perhaps it was the Heart Lamp that protected the three immortal souls?

At this point, another person arrived to visit. It was a patient brought in by one of Xifeng Bank's employees, the very merchant whom Chen Xing had been tracking—the first one to have experienced the symptoms of losing his immortal souls and mortal forms after returning from Mai City. Looking closely at him, Chen Xing saw that he looked deeply exhausted but was still keeping his spirits up. When the bank worker had told him there was a miracle doctor in town, he'd decided it wouldn't hurt to follow him back to Xifeng Bank and pay Chen Xing a visit.

Chen Xing didn't bother with taking his pulse. "When you contracted the illness, did you hear the sound of a bell?" he asked directly.

"The sound of a bell?" The merchant wore the same look of confused suspicion as the owner of the Fang manor had, but he gave it some thought. "I feel like I might have, but it seems I can't remember clearly anymore."

"Where were you when you keeled over?"

The merchant had been interrogated countless times on his experiences, and he found it easy to recount the events aside from the bell chime. He described his return from Mai City in great detail: As he entered

Kuaiji's city gates, an overwhelming drowsiness suddenly overcame him, causing him to fall from his horse. He was sent home, but he didn't feel any better, and he slipped into a three-day stupor, his mind a disoriented fog.

"Just like that kid over there," said the merchant. He was looking at Xiao Shan, who was sleeping on the couch. "Ah, look. How long has he been ill? What a pity, and at such a young age…"

Xiao Shan blearily opened an eye and looked at him, perplexed.

"Weren't you here to see a doctor?" Chen Xing asked. "Why are you handing out diagnoses to other people now? Who's the doctor here, you or me? Okay, you should go home and rest. Don't leave Kuaiji for the next few days."

The merchant left, and Chen Xing, Feng Qianjun, and Xiang Shu all looked at each other. They had finally discovered the cause of the plague—or rather, the affliction that wasn't a plague at all! Someone had used the Soulfall Bell to steal tens of thousands of earth souls from the ordinary citizens of Jiangnan!

"If we find the Soulfall Bell and release the souls inside," said Chen Xing, "they should recover. But where *is* the bell?"

The three drought fiend kings pursuing them hadn't been carrying any artifacts. Xiang Shu recalled Feng Qianyi had been the one controlling the Yin Yang Mirror in Chang'an, and it had been Zhou Zhen who held the Zheng Drum in Chi Le Chuan; the drought fiend kings had only assisted. This meant that there must still be another person behind the three drought fiend kings.

"We need to find out who this person is," Xiang Shu said. "I can recover my strength if we find the Soulfall Bell." He'd been bottling up his

anger for a long time now, and he'd kicked Shi Hai's ass many times over in his heart. The moment he regained his strength, those drought fiend kings were going to suffer.

"Uh… You should calm down a little," said Chen Xing.

Feng Qianjun crossed his arms. "This person may be hiding in Jiangnan like Dage was in Chang'an, but it won't be easy to figure out who he is. Never mind that we're being hunted down right now. If he has any intelligence to speak of, he won't reveal himself yet."

"In my mother's memories," added Xiang Shu, "when the Soulfall Bell cast its magic, there was a trace to follow. Remember the butterfly that materialized from the released soul? If we can lie in ambush and wait for this person to use the bell to cast magic, then pursue the direction in which the butterfly flies—"

"Flowers," Xiao Shan said suddenly. "I have some."

The three of them abruptly stopped speaking and looked at Xiao Shan. Xiao Shan had only understood a portion of what they were talking about, but he knew that anything to do with that glowing butterfly was important, so he produced several dried blossoms from his chest pocket and gave them to Chen Xing. Chen Xing was speechless.

"I meant to ask last night," Xiang Shu said. "After they turned into that glowing butterfly, why did the memories land on this specific flower?"

"This is called an Oblivion Flower," Chen Xing said. "You'd better keep your distance. This kind of flower only grows around earth veins, and there's a particular effect of the divine and earth veins that's carried in its pollen. After a person dies, their immortal souls and mortal forms are summoned to the heavens and enter the divine and earth veins for the next

cycle of samsara. Do you understand? The power inherent to divine and earth veins to draw souls into them is also known as ‘soul severance.’ Just like a surging river sweeps away the stones along the bank—”

“Just get to the point!” Xiang Shu said, impatient.

“Why so rude?” Chen Xing smiled beatifically. “Do you want to hit me again? Oh, but you’re no match for me now.”

Xiang Shu had nothing to say to that.

Feng Qianjun watched them both in silence for a moment. “Um, Xiang-xiongdi, a gentleman should bide his time and wait for the right opportunity to seek vengeance…”

“Can you *please* get to the point?” said Xiang Shu, patiently.

“As I said,” Chen Xing continued, “this is called the power of soul severance. This kind of flower will take in your memories. The pollen makes people sneeze, and then afterward, to their confusion, they realize they’ve forgotten many things…”

“So the butterfly that forms out of the earth soul is drawn to this flower?” asked Xiang Shu.

“Uh… Maybe? All these earth souls that the Soulfall Bell took away… Could they be… Is there any place in Jiangnan where this kind of flower would grow? And where did that flower your mother had three hundred years ago come from?! Oh, Xiang Shu, you beautiful genius! You’re so, so smart!”

Chapter 60

As Chen Xing spoke, he realized that he had a lead! He could almost see it: a strange location filled with Oblivion Flowers, where the earth souls taken from all of those people had turned into butterflies, fluttering through the sea of flowers! Wait, what did they need the power of that many earth souls for in the first place?

"The Xiang family must still have records of that place!" Chen Xing exclaimed. "They were dedicated to researching spiritual loci; they did that for a living! Feng-dage! Let's go back to the Xiang residence!"

"I'll send people to purchase the rest of the Fang family's scrolls so we can study them here," Feng Qianjun said.

That night, the rest of the scrolls were sent over, and Feng Qianjun and Chen Xing began their investigation. Xiao Shan joined them for a bit, but Xiang Shu, who couldn't read seal script, was forced to stand to one side and stare off into space.

"Find the earth vein, any records relating to the earth vein," Chen Xing told Xiao Shan. "I'll write out the characters for you. It's these two char—"

"I know!" Xiao Shan protested. "I'm not stupid!"

Chen Xing still thought of Xiao Shan as the child he had met at Carosha. He'd forgotten that Xiao Shan understood a lot of things by now.

"He just likes to treat other people like idiots," Xiang Shu told Xiao Shan. Chen Xing threw up his hands.

Not even a second later, Feng Qianjun said, “Chen Xing, come take a look at this one.”

Chen Xing spread out the silk scroll. It was a map showing the areas around Kuaiji and Jiankang as they’d been hundreds of years ago; the city boundaries had shifted since then and were very different in the modern day. On the map, faded orange marks from a cinnabar stick traced out a strange shape.

“The earth vein flows toward…here, in the city of Kuaiji,” Chen Xing muttered. “The entrance should be here.” He pointed at a spot on the map.

Feng Qianjun lined it up with the map of modern-day Kuaiji. “Shall we decide on a time to go there and take a look?”

“Let’s go now.” Xiang Shu didn’t want to wait any longer. He’d had enough.

The spot marked on the ancient map was in the northern part of the city. In the dead of night, the four of them armed themselves with their weapons and headed out, following the map until they found one of the entrances to the earth vein. Coincidentally, it was behind the governor’s manor, in an ancient well at the foot of the mountain. Sneaking into the manor was an easy undertaking, at least for them.

“I’ll go scout out the situation ahead.” Feng Qianjun tied a rope around his waist and climbed into the well. “You guys wait up here.”

Xiao Shan glanced into the well and then took a few lazy steps away, looking around curiously. “Xiao Shan!” Chen Xing hissed. “Where are you going now?”

Meanwhile, Xiang Shu inspected their surroundings. There were no crows around, and it had been a whole day since the drought fiend kings had shown themselves, but he felt a pervasive sense of unease. Perhaps their enemies were hiding in some dark corner, plotting how to defeat them.

“Hey,” he said abruptly, “why does the entrance just happen to be located in this governor’s manor?”

“There’s quite a few other entrances,” Chen Xing said. “We just picked the closest one. Don’t be so paranoid about everything. Xiao Shan, come back!”

Xiao Shan wanted to touch everything he saw. That boy had way too much curiosity! This time, it seemed he’d heard some kind of noise and tiptoed over to the eastern side of the manor. He was leaning against the wall and peeking through the window. Chen Xing made to stop him, but when he thought of Xiang Shu’s question, he hesitated. What if there really was a connection between the drought fiend kings and Wu Qi?

“What are you looking at?” he whispered.

Xiao Shan motioned for Chen Xing to come quickly, and soon they were both huddled outside the window, looking in. Inside was a perplexing scene: a Jin martial official and one of Wu Qi’s scribes were hugging each other tightly, leaving not a sliver of distance between them. The scribe was panting uncontrollably.

Xiao Shan held his breath, his face filled with suspicion. He glanced at Chen Xing, then looked back inside, as if asking, *What are they doing?*

Chen Xing watched the two men. The light in the room was dim, so he didn’t understand at first either. Xiang Shu came over to join them, hunching over to huddle up next to them and take a look.

He blinked. Xiao Shan shot him a confused look, and Xiang Shu promptly slapped his hand over Xiao Shan's eyes and dragged him away.

It was then that Chen Xing understood. Two…two men! He flushed red, and Xiang Shu very obviously averted his gaze from Chen Xing's face.

"What's that?" demanded Xiao Shan. "He's killing someone!"

"Don't ask!" Xiang Shu and Chen Xing replied in unison. "He's not killing anyone," Chen Xing added. "Forget it, quick. You didn't see anything."

Xiao Shan clearly didn't understand.

"There's a path at the bottom of the well!" Feng Qianjun tugged on the rope—he'd reached the bottom. "Come down and take a look! It's a dry waterway!"

They went back to the well. Xiao Shan slid down first. Xiang Shu stood at the edge of the well and wrapped the rope around his hand twice, then reached his other hand out to Chen Xing so that Chen Xing could hug him as they went down. Chen Xing was still distracted by what they'd just seen, and as he climbed up onto the edge, he slipped. Xiang Shu immediately wrapped his arms around him, and the two of them slid down the rope together.

They were pressed very close together, and as they slid, Chen Xing felt something poking him… Was Xiang Shu's body having some sort of reaction to what they just saw? It made Chen Xing feel even more awkward, as if the passion in that room was still lingering with them.

Down in the inky darkness of the old well, Feng Qianjun was oblivious to what had happened on their way down. Wind gusted past them

from somewhere in the distance. Xiang Shu took a moment to straighten his clothing while Chen Xing lit up the Heart Lamp and pointed it toward the water source. The light revealed a dark passageway.

Xiang Shu pressed down on Chen Xing's head to make him look down toward the ground—there was a thin, glowing crack in the earth there. Feng Qianjun sunk to one knee to poke at it. The light that shone through looked like it was reflecting off a chunk of fluorite hidden in the dirt.

With Feng Qianjun leading the way, they pushed forward. The light grew brighter as they went, and gradually, glowing crevices began to appear in the cave walls all around them.

"This is the earth vein," Chen Xing said. "The counterpart to the divine vein. The great river is flowing under our feet, in the earth below."

Feng Qianjun tried to use the Saber of Harmony and Life, but he had no way to access any of the earth vein's energy. Chen Xing explained to them that the divine and earth veins held what was considered the purest and most powerful of spiritual qi. That energy supported the rotation of the Divine Land, and it acted a cornerstone for their very world. It was fundamentally different from the mana that was now lost to them.

The earth vein was buried deep within the ground. Ordinarily it was never seen on the surface, but in some places where the rock layer was thin, it peeked out of the earth just a bit. Where this happened, its spiritual qi came to the surface with it, creating areas of distorted energy. These areas were what people commonly called spiritual loci.

They walked on. The ground below was a dried-out riverbed; hundreds of years ago, this place had been an underground waterway. As the earth vein's light grew brighter, the cavern around them also widened out—and along what had once been the banks of the riverbed, Oblivion Flowers began to appear.

Feng Qianjun gestured for Chen Xing to look. Evidently their guess had been correct. "This must be the place. Uh, Xiang-xiongdi, are you all right?"

Xiang Shu's breathing was growing more and more labored as they walked along the earth vein. He felt even worse when they came to a stop, and he managed, just barely, to wave his hand. "In this direction. I can sense it."

Chen Xing hurried over to support Xiang Shu and anxiously looked him over. "Should we turn back?"

Xiang Shu shook his head, leaning his weight against Chen Xing. "It's not important. Let's go. Do what I say."

A glowing butterfly landed on the petals of one of the flowers. Xiao Shan waved his claws at it, and the butterfly took to the air again with a flap of its wings and fluttered delicately into the depths of the cavern.

The cavern was lit by the glow of the earth vein, so Chen Xing put away the Heart Lamp and focused on carefully supporting Xiang Shu. The further they went, the more Oblivion Flowers they saw. "Pay attention," Chen Xing reminded his companions, "and make sure that you don't touch them, or you'll sneeze."

Suddenly, Xiao Shan cocked his head as if he'd heard something. He picked up his pace like he was going to sprint to the end of the river path,

but Chen Xing was braced for this. Fast as lightning, he grabbed Xiao Shan. “Don’t run around in here!”

This kid was so disobedient. Fed up, Chen Xing fastened a length of rope securely around his own body, then latched the hook that was attached to the other end of the rope onto Xiao Shan’s belt. Xiao Shan stopped.

“You’re not allowed to randomly touch things like that. If you keep doing it, we won’t bring you along next time.”

Begrudgingly, Xiao Shan obeyed.

They moved as a strange unit, the four of them, picking their way carefully down the dry riverbed. As they walked along it, they heard the sound of water gurgling up ahead, and they turned a corner to find a small creek flowing through a cavern even larger and brighter than the one they’d passed through. The harsh light of the cavern illuminated an ocean of Oblivion Flowers.

Feng Qianjun turned around suddenly and leaped sideways, pulling Chen Xing and Xiang Shu with him. All three of them ducked into the shadow of a naturally formed stone pillar.

The cavern ahead was the junction of several underground rivers, and inside it, water glittered with the brilliance of the earth vein’s light. Both banks of the river were blanketed with Oblivion Flowers as far as the eye could see. But that wasn’t all: Under the bewitching blue glow, amid the sea of flowers, were countless butterflies formed from souls.

The flow of the water was split by a single sandbank, and in the middle of that sandbank was a massive, shining array. A giant serpentine creature lay within it, a single broken horn protruding from its head. The array seemed to be drawing power from the butterflies.

Resentment flooded their senses. The cavern was pungent with it.

“What’s that?” Feng Qianjun asked, motioning for Chen Xing to look.

“I understand now,” Chen Xing whispered back. “They’re using souls to replace the spiritual qi they need to power the array. They used all of these Oblivion Flowers to trap the souls so that they can’t leave—”

“I’m not asking about that!” Feng Qianjun hissed. “Look!”

Chen Xing and Xiao Shan stuck their heads out and saw two people standing on the edge of the array. One was a woman in elaborate clothing; from what they could see of her profile, she was wearing the same mask that they had seen before. The other person was a scribe, holding a folded fan in his hand. His body was wreathed in black flames of resentment.

Xiang Shu pulled back behind the stone pillar and leaned his back heavily against it, panting. He seemed to be in great agony.

“Xiang Shu?” Chen Xing asked softly. The closer they got to that array, the more pain Xiang Shu felt. Chen Xing chanced another look out and saw that the woman was holding a bell.

It was the Soulfall Bell!

“That is a jiao,” Chen Xing whispered to Feng Qianjun. “Where did they manage to find one? Since the Silence of All Magic, very few snakes have managed to cultivate into jiao…”[5]

“Shh.” Feng Qianjun gestured to him to be even quieter.

“This city is minuscule,” the woman sneered, “and you still managed to lose them? While you were hot on their heels?”

As soon as the woman opened her mouth, Chen Xing and Feng Qianjun looked at each other, wide-eyed. Chen Xing mouthed her name: *Wen Zhe*. Feng Qianjun nodded.

The scribe was still wreathed in resentment, and his voice was hoarse. “Feng Qianjun has his people attacking my eyes and ears wherever they go, so it’s difficult to discern where they went. All we can do is wait for nightfall and have the drought fiend kings split up and search the area.”

“Where are the drought fiend kings?” demanded Wen Zhe. “When I saw them, they were full of murderous intent, and they looked very intimidating, but now they’ve gone and squirreled themselves away again.”

“Jiangnan is not under my control. If they make too many appearances, they will alert our enemies. I had them hide in a family’s woodshed for the time being.”

“You had your three subordinates hide in a common woodshed?” Wen Zhe asked in disbelief. “Why exactly do you want Chen Xing and Shulü Kong anyway? In my opinion, when you returned to Jiankang, you should have lured all those people in and ended them in one fell swoop. It would have made things much easier. If you needed them later, you could have always turned them into drought fiends. What difference would that have made?”

The scribe shook open the fan and gave it a wave, diffusing the resentment around him as if it was something tangible. “You don’t see the full picture,” he protested weakly. “My lord needs a suitable vessel if he is to revive successfully. The original candidate I picked out for the vessel was the wielder of the Heart Lamp: Chen Xing.”

Wen Zhe smiled scornfully.

“As you know,” the scribe went on, “when an artifact is refined by resentment, it takes on a markedly different appearance. Naturally, my lord’s new body must rely on the strongest artifact in the world. The Heart Lamp can dominate a person’s heart; if we can get our hands on it and refine it into the Dark Lamp instead, the wielder’s body will be perfect as my lord’s new vessel. My lord would have the power to control the hearts of all the common people in the world. Who could fight back against a power like that?”

“It’s a pity, then, that despite all your machinations, your plans fell through.”

“Only because I’ve found a better candidate, one who can fully replace the Heart Lamp… But I can’t stand here and gossip. I need to return quickly.”

“Wait!” Wen Zhe protested. “What, are you handing this mess off to me?”

“Follow the old plan,” the scribe said in his hoarse voice.

“What old plan?! I don’t want to keep waiting! When is Fu Jian going to get here?”

“When the Qin troops head south for battle, I will inform you. For now, the three drought kings will remain here for you to command.”

“What use do I have for those worthless idiot kings who spent three days hiding in the woodshed and can only come out at night?”

“I don’t want to leave them here for you either, but right now, my mana isn’t strong enough to hold out for that long. I must first return to resolve our most pressing issue, or they will find out sooner or later that I’m using necromancy,” the scribe said. “I’m leaving now. Wen Zhe, do not take

any rash actions. Remember, that was how Feng Qianyi fell short of his goal…”

With that, the scribe raised his folding fan, and the resentment rose into the air and whirled into a black firestorm. It wrapped around him before burrowing into the earth vein below, and he vanished without a trace. At the very last second, Feng Qianjun poked his head out again, risking being seen by the enemy in the hope that he could catch a distant glimpse of the scribe. But it was too late; the scribe’s face was already obscured by the black energy that turned into fire and whisked him away.

Chen Xing followed suit and stuck his head out too, but Feng Qianjun shook his head. Seeing Feng Qianjun’s hand tremble on the handle of his blade, Chen Xing covered it with his own hand, shaking his head right back. He knew that Feng Qianjun was distraught at having been mere steps away from the man who’d manipulated his brother from the shadows, but this was not a suitable time to rush in and start a fight.

Chen Xing pointed at the bell and mouthed, *The Soulfall Bell*. He needed to retrieve the artifact first.

“We’re brainstorming ideas. Hang in there, Xiang Shu.”

Chen Xing inspected Xiang Shu, who was clearly still in a lot of pain. His forehead was drenched in sweat, his eyes were closed, and he was panting uncontrollably, as if he had a high fever.

“I’ll go draw the enemy away,” Feng Qianjun murmured. “Xiao Shan, you’re in charge of stealing the artifact.”

“Don’t step on the Oblivion Flowers!” said Chen Xing. “Let me remind you once more of this very important point!”

Feng Qianjun nodded and dodged behind another pillar.

Chen Xing turned to Xiao Shan. “In a moment, when Feng-dage makes his move, you’ll need to go up there to steal the artifact—”

“I get it!” Xiao Shan whispered back. “You don’t need to say it again!”

Chen Xing pressed his hands together in a silent prayer for Sui Xing to watch over them.

Wen Zhe was holding the Soulfall Bell out with one hand, but she gradually lowered it as she walked slowly into the array. Sorrow flooded her face, and she reached her free hand out to stroke the scales of the huge jiao. Half of its body had already turned into a rotting corpse.

Behind his pillar, Feng Qianjun was ready. With a sword in each hand, he drew a circle in the air, bent over, and jumped out with a *whoosh*.

“Go!” Chen Xing whispered. Xiao Shan put on his claws, hunched over, and rushed out with a whoosh of his own…

…and dragged Chen Xing behind him with the rope fastened around Chen Xing’s waist.

“Wait!” Chen Xing hollered. “I forgot to untie the rope!”

Wen Zhe whipped around at the sound of his voice and saw Feng Qianjun rushing toward her, light beaming off his blade. Xiao Shan pulled on the rope’s slack, yanking Chen Xing toward him, then reached for her right wrist with his claw.

Three exorcists charging into Wen Zhe’s base camp at the same time?! The color drained from her face, and she screeched, “Feng Qianjun! You villain!”

The moment the words left her mouth, she somersaulted through the air, dodging the light of Feng Qianjun's attack. She retaliated by throwing out a soft whip that snared Feng Qianjun's wrist and pulled him into the array. In the same motion, she shook the Soulfall Bell with her right hand—*clang!*—and parried the attack from Xiao Shan's Sky-Rending Claws. At the sound of the bell, all of the glowing butterflies flapped their wings and began to move as if they'd been summoned.

Wen Zhe stuck the landing and stood firmly with the Soulfall Bell in her grasp, gazing at the three intruders in horror. "How did you all get in here?"

"I heard it all!" Chen Xing said furiously. "Everything you and Shi Hai said, I heard every word of it! Quickly, Xiao Shan, untie the rope!" He hurried to Xiao Shan's side and undid the knot.

Wen Zhe's gaze was wandering and uncertain. "Well, now that you're here, I hope you don't think I'll let any of you leave! I, for one, am curious to see what will happen. The Heart Lamp may protect you from the Soulfall Bell, but the same can't be said for your comrades."

"Don't let her cast her spells!" Chen Xing shouted. "Attack!"

Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun wasted no time: They rushed in simultaneously to flank Wen Zhe, who was halfway through casting her spell. Realizing that if she didn't move she would be killed on the spot by their two attacks, she was forced to turn another somersault to dodge the blades and claws. Feng Qianjun couldn't afford to give her the time to cast any spells, so he launched a series of successive attacks while Xiao Shan leaped into the air and aimed a flying backhand at her.

Wen Zhe was fielding attacks from both sides, and Xiao Shan's whirlwind speed was too much for her to deal with. When they'd first met Xiao Shan, not even Xiang Shu had been able to grab him; what hope did Wen Zhe have of keeping up? "Two on one!" she raged. "Do you have no honor?"

Chen Xing was on the outskirts of the battle, directing their movements from afar for fear of getting too close. "Don't talk about the rules of the engagement with her!" he shouted.

Wen Zhe blocked again. As the bell clanged a second time, Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan each felt a shock to their souls, and their eyes grew hazy and unfocused. Wen Zhe took this opportunity to land on the head of the azure jiao, and a black, swirling vortex of resentment began to gather around the Soulfall Bell.

Damn it, Chen Xing thought. One more wave of her wrist and she'd take Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan's souls. With nothing else for it, he sprinted into the array, risking his life to throw the rope with the hook at Wen Zhe…

…who evaded it easily with a cold chuckle. "With your amateur skills, you think you can—"

But Chen Xing could see Feng Qianjun recovering. He made a rapid decision. "Take the resentment from her!" he shouted.

Feng Qianjun clasped his hands together, and his two blades flowed together in a new rotating form. Xiao Shan had recovered as well, and he managed to draw over the mass of resentment around the Soulfall Bell with a single flick of his claw. As he did so, the resentment powering the array burst open, and one-third of it surged into each of the three artifacts. Feng

Qianjun absorbed the energy in his blades and readied the Saber of Harmony and Life, but just as he was about to charge in, Chen Xing realized a severe problem:

The Saber of Harmony and Life's effect on plants.

The saber's power flowed over the Oblivion Flowers, and they opened their petals, releasing their pollen.

"No, no, no!" Chen Xing cried. "Run, quickly—Achoo!"

Feng Qianjun and Wen Zhe sneezed as well. "Achoo!"

"Achoo!"

Xiao Shan's sneeze was half cut off. "Choo!"

The resentment dissipated as it was sucked into the three artifacts, and the array fell into a state of calm. Wen Zhe, Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, and Chen Xing all blinked at each other.

"Huh? Where are we?" said Chen Xing.

Feng Qianjun put down his blades. "What am I doing?"

Xiao Shan blinked, confused.

"Who are you all?" Wen Zhe asked suspiciously.

Chapter 61

CHEN XING FROWNED. “Wait a minute, why is there a jiao here? Who are you? You’re the boss of Dongzhe Bank… How did you end up here?”

Wen Zhe glanced around, a look of realization dawning on her face. “Yes! I’m the boss of Dongzhe Bank… No, wait, this jiao… Husband! Husband!”

Feng Qianjun raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean, husband? Don’t go around shouting something like that!”

Wen Zhe took a step toward the azure jiao. “I remember now,” she murmured to herself. “Lord Shi Hai had me manage this place and use the Soulfall Bell to collect people’s souls and refine my husband’s corpse. When Fu Jian crosses the Yangtze River, I’ll release my husband, kill the emperor, and work with Fu Jian from the inside. But a group of exorcists showed up not long ago… Ah! Exorcists! It was you!”

Chen Xing startled. “Yes!” he said quickly. “I’m an exorcist! Feng-dage, we’re here to get rid of the yao! Quick, catch her!”

Wen Zhe let out a sharp cry and raised the Soulfall Bell. Remembering something crucial, Feng Qianjun shook the Saber of Harmony and Life and was about to charge forward when the flower field erupted again. Oblivion Pollen filled the air.

Chen Xing sneezed, and Feng Qianjun followed suit. “Ha… Achoo!”

Wen Zhe’s sneeze came out like a hiss. Xiao Shan’s was another high-pitched “choo!”

They all stared at each other blankly. Wen Zhe looked at the Soulfall Bell in her hand, utterly lost. “What am I doing with this thing?”

“Huh? What is this place?” said Chen Xing. Xiao Shan glanced around in bewilderment.

“Wen Zhe? Why are you here?” Feng Qianjun asked. “Come over here! There’s a monster behind you!”

“This is my husband!” Wen Zhe exclaimed, panicked. “He ended up like this after he slew the evil jiao—his body was corroded by its venom! Don’t kill him!”

“Oh? Why not?” asked Chen Xing. “Wait, weren’t we here to exorcise a yao? I remember… Did we go down a well…?”

“Shi Hai-daren?! My lord, where are you?!”

“Shi Hai!” Feng Qianjun roared. “You killed my brother! Prepare to die!”

All at once, their memories returned to them. Wen Zhe’s expression darkened. “Face your doom!”

Feng Qianjun shook the saber again, unleashing the power of Harmony and Life. The sea of Oblivion Flowers flared brilliantly and released a third wave of pollen into the air.

“Achoo!”

“Hachoo!”

“Ah-chi!”

“Choo!”

Bewildered silence fell. Chen Xing took in the unfamiliar surroundings, his head spinning.

“Listen to me!” It was Xiang Shu, staggering out from behind a stone pillar to shout at them. “Don’t breathe! Watch out for the pollen! Get the artifact from her! Feng Qianjun, put away your saber!”

His voice became weaker with each word he spoke. When he was finished, he collapsed to one knee near the edge of the formation, using his heavy sword to steady himself. Heeding Xiang Shu’s words, Feng Qianjun sheathed his saber and charged at Wen Zhe barehanded.

“What are we doing?” Chen Xing asked.

“I don’t know, just listen to him!”

“You thieves!” Wen Zhe shouted. “Why are you taking my artifact?! The Soulfall Bell… Wait, I remember! I—”

With a wolflike howl, Xiao Shan raised his claws and surged forward. Wen Zhe couldn’t dodge in time, and she took a blow to the wrist. The Soulfall Bell flew from her grasp. Thinking quickly, Chen Xing snared the bell with his grappling hook and yanked it back until it was firmly in his hands.

Meanwhile, Feng Qianjun pinned Wen Zhe down and pressed a dagger to her neck. Wen Zhe struggled fiercely against his grip. “Let go of me!”

“So what now? Are we here to steal this artifact?” Chen Xing asked. “Isn’t this the Soulfall Bell? Oh, I remember now! Yes, yes, yes! Hand it over!”

“Quick,” Xiang Shu urged, “purify the artifact! What are you just standing there for?!”

With the Soulfall Bell in his hand, Chen Xing took a few steps back and poured the power of the Heart Lamp into the artifact to purify it. The

Heart Lamp blazed brightly, its energy flowing through his veins and into the Soulfall Bell.

Chen Xing smiled at Xiang Shu. “Good thing you weren’t affected by the Oblivion Flowers.”

“Hurry!” Feng Qianjun and Xiang Shu shouted at once.

Chen Xing concentrated his mana, and the resentment in the Soulfall Bell erupted with a violent boom. In his hand, the body of the bell glowed white. “Seal!” Chen Xing cried.

He stepped back and rang the bell. *Clang!* The sky flooded with seemingly infinite glowing butterflies. Flying like a river of stars, they poured into the Soulfall Bell.

“What now?” Chen Xing asked. “We need to get to the surface and release the butterfl—Xiang Shu! Xiang Shu!”

Xiang Shu had collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Without the glowing butterflies, the Dragon-Binding Array had no source of power. It grew dim and then, with a hum, vanished completely. Feng Qianjun looked closely at Wen Zhe’s face, and when he saw her eyes grow murky, he realized why she always wore such a strong fragrance—she was masking the stench of death! “You… You’re a drought fiend?!”

He tightened his grip on her, and she let out a strange laugh, her features contorting. “Ha…ha ha…”

The formation’s power was gone. The giant, decaying jiao opened its eyes, lifted its head, and turned toward Feng Qianjun and Wen Zhe.

“Feng-dage! Watch out, behind you!” Chen Xing shouted.

Now awake, the jiao struck with explosive force. It lunged toward Feng Qianjun, black resentment swirling around it. Xiao Shan and Chen

Xing rushed forward. With a thunderous crash, the jiao's tail slammed into the cave wall and sent Feng Qianjun flying.

Xiao Shan leaped into the air, twisting his body and flashing his Sky-Rending Claws, but the jiao shot upward with incredible speed and darted past the stone pillars that supported the cave. It raised its talons to meet Xiao Shan's strike, which snapped them in two, sending filthy blood spewing everywhere—and yet the jiao's massive body deftly dodged this devastating blow. It slipped around the stone pillar and, with a sweep of its tail, sent Xiao Shan crashing back to the ground. Worse, the force from Xiao Shan's strike with the Sky-Rending Claws ripped through the air and severed the stone pillar, sending violent tremors through the cave and rocks falling to the ground.

Xiao Shan yelled out as he crashed into the rubble. He struggled back to his feet, but before he could rejoin the fight, Chen Xing pounced from the side and dragged him away.

"The cave is going to collapse!" Feng Qianjun shouted. "Get out of here!"

"None of you are leaving!" Wen Zhe's voice was a chilling shriek. "This is where you will die!"

With Xiao Shan in tow, Chen Xing rushed to join Feng Qianjun by Xiang Shu's side. "Xiang Shu! Xiang Shu!"

Xiang Shu's eyes remained tightly shut.

Feng Qianjun drew his saber again. "We only have one shot left! Chen Xing, can this big guy eat the Oblivion Pollen?"

"I don't know! It's coming!" Chen Xing cried. "Xiang Shu! Can you move? Get up!" He summoned the Heart Lamp and pressed it against Xiang

Shu’s chest.

The jiao twisted and soared through the air with Wen Zhe atop its head; she’d climbed up there after the jiao freed her from Feng Qianjun’s grip. Holding onto its broken horn, she steered it to dive toward them with a momentum that promised a cataclysmic strike. The jiao opened its massive jaws, and a toxic green mist poured out. It was ready to engulf all four of them…but on the ground, Xiang Shu’s eyes snapped open.

With a single stroke of his sword, he blocked the strike. The blade took the impact with a sharp, resonant clang and the shimmering afterimage of a glowing ring. Vengeful energy exploded from the immense force of the collision. Where the man and jiao clashed, a phantom dragon made of light seemed to materialize beside Xiang Shu and roar ferociously at the azure jiao.

Chen Xing felt his eardrums tremble violently and nearly vomited blood, but Xiang Shu swept his sword smoothly to the side. With a swift kick, he got to his feet and turned his shoulder, and the sword in his hand changed into a shining, whip-like cord. He swung it at the azure jiao. “Get lost!”

The whip cracked through the air and coiled around the jiao, and Wen Zhe’s face drained of color. “What is this?! Shulü Kong!”

Bound by the Acala Blade, the azure jiao thrashed wildly and slammed into the cave ceiling.

“The cave is going to collapse!” shouted Feng Qianjun.

Massive stones began to fall. Xiao Shan let out a loud howl and used his Sky-Rending Claws to slice the falling rocks into fragments.

“Get to the surface!” Chen Xing yelled. “We can’t fight here!”

Wen Zhe said nothing further. She directed the jiao away, and, dragging the Acala Blade in the form of a light whip behind it, it crashed through the cave wall. Shattered wood and structures from aboveground tumbled down around them, and the jiao roared as it took to the sky.

Under the moonlight, the city of Kuaiji's western wall collapsed out of nowhere with a thunderous roar, and an entire street sunk into the ground. An azure jiao shot from the earth, spiraling through the air.

Holding on to Chen Xing, Xiang Shu surged out from the ground. He was followed quickly by Xiao Shan, who shot up like an arrow and landed on a rooftop, and Feng Qianjun, who leapt a few steps and rushed onto the long street. The four of them looked up to see the azure jiao twisting in the sky under the bright moon. It opened its mouth and released another thick cloud of toxic mist.

"I can't wait any longer," Wen Zhe said coldly. "There's no better day than today to avenge my husband!"

"Isn't your husband the jiao you're riding?" Feng Qianjun shouted, gripping his Saber of Harmony and Life. "He's clearly not dead! What revenge are you talking about?"

"You've recovered?" Chen Xing asked Xiang Shu in disbelief. "But I… I haven't released the souls from the Soulfall Bell yet!"

Xiang Shu, who was indeed fully recovered, frowned up at the horizon before turning his gaze back on Chen Xing. "Can you help me deal with that jiao?" he asked, instead of explaining.

Chen Xing nodded. "Give me some time. Protect me while I cast my spell. If that thing starts rampaging, who knows how many people will die."

“Exorcists, assemble!” Xiang Shu shouted. “Protect Chen Xing!”

Ignoring the jiao, Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan leapt down from the rooftops to stand guard by Chen Xing’s side. Xiang Shu positioned himself between Chen Xing and the jiao, holding his heavy sword and pointing a finger at the night sky. Chen Xing silently recited the incantation and raised the Soulfall Bell, hoping that the spells he had learned at his sect would work.

The light of his Heart Lamp grew steadily brighter. Xiang Shu seemed to sense it; the Acala Blade emitted a brilliant glow, the nine characters on its body flaring one by one with white flames.

“Reversal!” Chen Xing shouted.

A resounding clang echoed through the heavens. Chen Xing held the mouth of the bell up toward the sky, and millions of glowing butterflies exploded out of it. They scattered across the city, flying out toward Danyang, Wujun, Jiankang, and beyond, a sea of light sweeping over the landscape. Hundreds of thousands of butterflies—hundreds of thousands of souls—flowed toward their owners. The view in the night sky was spectacular.

In Kuaiji City, numerous households stirred awake as butterflies settled on the foreheads of plague-stricken patients. As the butterflies vanished into their bodies, the sick came alert and emerged from their homes in confusion.

“Wretched exorcists in league with the enemy,” Wen Zhe’s voice rang harshly from the sky. “Today, I will rid the world of you all!”

When Chen Xing used the Soulfall Bell, a pain had pierced his heart, so sharp he almost couldn’t breathe. It was like when he purified the Zheng

Drum: Trying to expel the accumulated resentment within a magical artifact that had been refined for so long was taxing on his heart, especially when all the power he had was from the Heart Lamp in his soul.

“I’m fine.” Chen Xing looked up and met Xiang Shu’s gaze, forcibly swallowing back the blood that was rising in his throat. “We need to figure out a way to deal with that jiao.”

Xiang Shu nodded. “Leave it to me. You two, protect Chen Xing and find a safe place to stay.”

Wu Qi had been woken up and was rushing over with his subordinates. “What’s going on? What kind of monster is that? A dragon?!”

The azure jiao rampaged through Kuaiji City, spewing toxic fumes wherever it went. The people caught in its path fled screaming; those touched by its fumes fell dead instantly.

“Come at me, Wen Zhe!” Chen Xing roared.

Wen Zhe’s seething voice echoed through the sky, full of hatred and bitterness. “My husband once protected the people of the Divine Land, and you call him a monster. What value is there in a world like this?”

“Take him away,” Xiang Shu instructed Wu Qi.

“No, wait! Governor!” Chen Xing shouted. “Evacuate the people in the city first! Get them out of here!”

Xiang Shu leaped onto a rooftop while Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan quickly climbed to higher ground. Cautious of Xiang Shu and taking advantage of its ability to fly, the jiao refused to lower its altitude. The flightless exorcists had no choice but to attack the creature with bows and arrows from the ground.

Meanwhile, Wu Qi dispatched people to evacuate the citizens and brought Chen Xing to the highest point of the county governor's residence. Chen Xing hurried to the railing and looked out, but he found that Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan had disappeared. Only Xiang Shu remained in sight, leaping across the rooftops in pursuit of the jiao. Chen Xing leaned on the railing, breathing heavily.

"Are you all right?" asked a scholar standing at Wu Qi's side.

Chen Xing shook his head. "To be honest with you," he said to Wu Qi, "we're exorcists. We came to Kuaiji to investigate the plague."

The onlookers were astonished. "Exorcists?!"

But Wu Qi was already familiar with the concept. Centuries ago, the Xiang family had been prosperous in Kuaiji, and tales of their deeds had been passed down through the generations. For the locals here, hearing about exorcists was less shocking than it would have been for people in the Central Plains, whose historical records had been lost to time.

"There are still exorcists around?" he asked. Chen Xing nodded weakly.

A Jin army general spoke up. "I'll lead the troops to assist them. We can use grappling hooks to pull that monster down from the sky!"

"Be careful," the scholar warned him.

Suddenly, Chen Xing realized that he'd seen these two men before, at Wu Qi's residence before he'd entered the well. He hadn't recognized them with their clothes on.

"You two…?" Recovering from his surprise, Chen Xing stopped himself from asking if they were lovers. Was that really what was important

right now? He quickly changed the subject. “Has Kuaiji ever had any records of jiao or giant serpents causing trouble?”

“I’ll look into it,” the scholar replied. His name, Chen Xing learned, was Zheng Lun, and the general’s name was Bi Hun. They were Wu Qi’s right-hand men.

This entire discussion was taking place on the third-floor terrace of Wu Qi’s residence, where they had a clear view of the entire city. “Governor,” Chen Xing said, “you should leave the city and take shelter.”

“I am the highest-ranking official in Kuaiji,” Wu Qi replied. “The people have yet to leave the city, and you are all still fighting here. How could I leave?”

Chen Xing admired Wu Qi’s bravery. A jiao had appeared out of nowhere, and he, the local governor, was not the slightest bit afraid. He issued orders calmly and showed remarkable leadership, setting a fine example for others. But now he was forced to watch the jiao wreak havoc in the city while Bi Hun assembled the local soldiers to pursue the jiao with Xiang Shu.

Zheng Lun stepped forward and opened a book. “There’s no record in Kuaiji, but I just remembered something. Decades ago, during the chaos of the Yongjia Rebellion, many local records from the Lu region were brought to the Jiangnan area, and some ended up in Kuaiji. Chen-daren, take a look at this. It says that a jiao caused trouble in the Si River, and that it was slain by the exorcist Xin Yuanping and his protector, Wen Che…”

Che Xing’s eyes went round. Back in his sect, he’d read the memorial that Wen Che had written for the exorcist Xin Yuanping. Wen Zhe…Wen Che was a woman?! Could she really be the Wen Zhe he’d just

encountered?! And that azure jiao, was it really Xin Yuanping? But Xin Yuanping had died after slaying the jiao. How could he have turned into a jiao himself?

“Chen-daren?” Zheng Lun asked urgently.

Chapter 62

"THIS…IS TOO MUCH for me to take in," Chen Xing said, collecting himself. "They were our own people?! Xiang Shu! Xiang Shu!"

Xiang Shu had climbed up the city wall and was now pursuing the azure jiao around the city's periphery. The jiao spewed rotten black blood onto the earth below as it ceaselessly writhed in the air. During the chase, a sliver of dawn had appeared on the distant horizon and the sky had gradually brightened; now, the whole city was illuminated in morning light.

"What?!" Xiang Shu called back. He was clambering around a turret, sword in hand. "Don't use the Heart Lamp anymore! It's too harmful for you!"

"That's Xin Yuanping!" Chen Xing shouted. "The jiao is Xin Yuanping!"

As Feng Qianjun approached the jiao, he heard Chen Xing's cry and looked up. "Who's Xin Yuanping?"

"An exorcist!"

"How do we get rid of it?" Xiang Shu yelled. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Ah, no! Sorry! I was just telling you its origins!"

"Why?!" Xiang Shu was almost at his breaking point. He had nearly caught up with the jiao, and Chen Xing just had to interrupt him. He turned around again and resumed sprinting along the wall in pursuit.

The azure jiao could apparently sense that Xiang Shu wasn't going to be an easy opponent, because it continually avoided him. Watching

attentively, Chen Xing noticed that the creature that Xin Yuanping had turned into could not control its own movements very well; it was thrashing in pain. Astride its head, Wen Zhe rode with one hand pressed firmly down on it, seeping resentment, and directed its flight path through the city.

The Jin troops assembled on the city wall, each setting up a heavy-duty crossbow aimed directly at the dancing jiao. Bi Hun, the military officer, climbed up to a high spot on the wall where a war drum sat, a drumstick in his hand as his eyes tracked the path of the jiao.

Soon, Xiang Shu let out a whistle. Bi Hun beat the drum once with all his strength. *Dong!* The earth-shattering drumbeat echoed all through the city, and on cue, the Jin troops let loose what looked like tens of thousands of arrows. Each arrow had a grappling hook at its tip, and they flew straight at the azure jiao.

Focusing intently on what was unfolding before him, Chen Xing lit up his Heart Lamp. But the moment he felt the Heart Lamp's power, Xiang Shu cried out. "Don't use it!"

"Just hurry!" Chen Xing insisted. "I can still keep it up for a little while longer!"

Xiang Shu gritted his teeth and transformed his sword into a colossal bow. He drew the string all the way back and loosed a radiant arrow, which streaked like a shooting star toward the jiao's head. Sensing the imminent danger, Wen Zhe swiftly maneuvered the jiao so that the arrow would hit the inverted scales on its underside rather than its head—but the arrow pierced straight through the jiao's body and flew into the sky beyond.

Foul blood erupted into the air like a toxic mist, and the jiao let out a hoarse, monstrous roar. Seizing this opening, Feng Qianjun jumped onto the roof of a building and swung his saber in a horizontal slash. With a few bounds, Xiao Shan caught up to him and perched on the saber's blade.

"Go!" roared Feng Qianjun.

Xiao Shan became a blur of motion as he soared toward the jiao's head. He flipped right over Wen Zhe's head with a strike from the Sky-Rending Claws, and suddenly, Wen Zhe was holding the jiao's severed horn.

"Even if it kills me," she screamed as she jabbed it at Xiao Shan, "I have to—"

But she didn't have a chance to finish. Xiang Shu raised his hands, palms together, and intertwined his index and middle fingers. With a swift inward motion, he executed the "Returning Wind, Landing Geese" martial art technique, bending the trajectory of the radiant arrow that had soared into the distant sky. The arrow whizzed back and severed Wen Zhe's arm in a single decisive strike.

Wen Zhe cried out in agony. Xiao Shan wasted no time; he tore into her shoulder with his claw, dislodging her grip on the azure jiao and sending her plummeting toward the earth below. Free from the shackles of resentment, the jiao let out a long roar. Fiercely, it smashed the homes below it to pieces—and then it flew away and disappeared into the distance.

Chen Xing deactivated the Heart Lamp and was greeted by a sickening rush of pain in his chest. He couldn't breathe properly. *Damn it*, he thought. He had used up all of the mana in the Heart Lamp earlier when he purified the Soulfall Bell.

“Don’t use it again!” Xiang Shu shouted up at him.

Feng Qianjun, Xiang Shu, and Xiao Shan all landed on the main street of the city, and Wen Zhe crashed down to the ground nearby. She struggled to rise, and in the process, the top half of her long, red brocade robe was torn open to reveal a flat, pale chest.

“A…man?” Feng Qianjun said, bewildered. “You’re a man?!” The proprietress of Dongzhe Bank, who had been in the role for decades, was a man disguised as a woman?!

Wen Zhe’s arm had been severed, but the stump didn’t bleed. With a cold laugh, he slowly got to his feet. “Why else would I spend so many decades refusing to let anyone get close enough to see my body?” he sneered.

“Enough!” Xiang Shu growled. “I don’t care who you are! Exactly how many people have you killed?!”

“We saved the lives of common people of the Divine Land!” Wen Zhe yelled back. “And how did those idiotic commoners repay us?! They didn’t! Liu Heng, that ungrateful bastard—when he learned that the jiao had poisoned Xin Yuanping, he sunk him to the bottom of the river! I want revenge! I want to give these ingrates what’s coming to them!” Even as he spoke, Wen Zhe’s remaining arm transformed into a grotesque, bony claw, and he surged at Xiang Shu.

Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan were both too late to intercept Wen Zhe. He landed in front of Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu was faster. With a single swing, Xiang Shu’s sword pierced and broke Wen Zhe’s ribs, sending him flying into the wall of a nearby residence like a rock from a catapult. The

wall shattered under the impact, and bricks and tiles went flying in all directions.

With a grim laugh, Wen Zhe climbed out of the rubble. His body had recovered rapidly, and the arm that had been severed by an arrow was growing back before their eyes. “I, too, was once a Great Exorcist’s Protector Martial God. With the Silence of All Magic in place, you are limited by the constraints of your flesh and blood. But Shi Hai has given me the power of the Demon God—”

Xiang Shu didn’t wait for Wen Zhe to finish before he slashed at him again. “Then why don’t you attack with it?!” Without the aid of the Heart Lamp, Xiang Shu was relying solely on the sword, but he’d still managed to smash both Wen Zhe and the building behind him into pieces.

With a shout like a madman’s, Wen Zhe transformed both of his hands into bony claws and charged at Xiang Shu. But Xiang Shu was like a whirlwind powered by his own fury, and he quickly gained the upper hand and overpowered Wen Zhe. Like Xiang Shu, Wen Zhe had been a Protector Martial God, but he was no match for Xiang Shu’s blows.

Furious, he grumbled, “Why are you…”

In the grip of fear, Wen Zhe attempted to disengage and flee, but Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan had anticipated this. They closed in, flanking him as he reached the main street and forcing him back toward Xiang Shu. That was Wen Zhe’s limit. He turned toward them. “Let’s perish together, then!” he cried, and he unleashed the resentment in his body.

Wen Zhe flipped through the air, enveloped in pitch-black resentment, and lunged at Xiang Shu. But the instant they met face-to-face,

Xiang Shu lifted his sword and smashed it into Wen Zhe's head, sending him crashing clear through multiple successive walls.

"We can't keep going like this!" Feng Qianjun said. "This guy can't be killed! We need Chen Xing's help!"

Xiang Shu looked up toward the terrace where Chen Xing had been watching the entire fight. Leaning his whole body against the railing, Chen Xing extended a trembling hand and summoned the last of his strength to ignite the Heart Lamp.

"Don't worry about me!" he cried. "Purify him!"

Xiang Shu frowned deeply as his sword erupted in a blinding flash of light.

Wen Zhe struggled back to his feet with a thunderous roar of pain, confusion plain in his eyes. He raised his hand and turned toward the spectacle of the sword. "You…won't have…a good ending…either," he muttered. "One day, you will discover…that what you are extinguishing your life for…is merely…a joke."

"Go to hell!" Xiang Shu replied, his voice like ice.

The sword came down with another blinding flash of white light. Wen Zhe screamed in agony as the white flame reduced him to ashes.

Drained of energy and clinging to the railing, Chen Xing sank to his knees. Suddenly, behind him, he heard the heavy footsteps of iron boots on wood. Wu Qi and Zheng Lun spun around.

"Chen-daren, are these your companions too?" asked Zheng Lun.

Chen Xing turned slowly, enduring the surge of blood and qi coursing through his body. With his back pressed against the railing and his feet skidding against the floor, he watched the three drought fiend kings, clad in full black armor, ascend to the third floor of the governor's manor.

"You guys…go…quick," Chen Xing mumbled. A trickle of fresh blood ran down from the corner of his mouth. "Xiang Shu, Xiang Shu…"

The three drought fiend kings pulled out their swords in tandem, but Wu Qi and Zheng Lun positioned themselves in front of Chen Xing, unwilling to leave him behind.

"Evil yao without honor," Wu Qi rebuked them furiously, "the world will not allow evil to triumph over good! Begone!"

Xiang Shu let out a relieved sigh when Wen Zhe turned to ash, but his relief did not last long. When he lifted his head and raised his free hand to wave in the direction of the manor, he saw a spray of fresh blood from the third-floor terrace. For a moment, he was too stunned to move.

Chen Xing was standing with his back against the railing, and over him loomed the silhouettes of the three drought fiend kings.

Chen Xing couldn't hold on any longer. He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut, leaning back against the railing. Then, from somewhere behind him, there came a loud cry—it was Xiang Shu. In that moment, the Heart Lamp's power burst out from Chen Xing's meridians, unintentional and uncontrollable.

What a bizarre feeling. Every other time Chen Xing had used the Heart Lamp, he had done so deliberately; the Heart Lamp always glowed in response to his intentions. But now, as he hung on the precipice between

life and death, it felt as if Xiang Shu had forced him to ignite it. And the light that beamed from the Heart Lamp was far more potent than it had ever been before.

In the same instant, a hundred paces away on the main street, Xiang Shu's body arched slightly. Holding the Acala Blade in hand, he assumed the form of the war god in a gilded white martial robe. The sword hummed, its form shifting into faint silhouettes of all six magical instruments.

Boom! Like a golden comet blazing a brilliant trail, Xiang Shu flew through the air toward the highest point on the governor's manor, flattening every obstacle in his path.

All Chen Xing could feel was a surge of warm light enshrouding his entire body. The passage of time seemed to slow down; the drought fiend kings brandished their swords, but their movements decelerated until they came to a total stop. Xiang Shu rushed up to the terrace, accompanied by a light as bright as the sun. Six magical instruments materialized all at once to unleash a barrage of attacks on the three drought fiend kings. Sima Yi's helmet was flung off; Sima Liang pulled away to resist; and Sima Ying's arm broke, armor and all.

Chen Xing's eyes widened, reflecting the luminous golden silhouette of Xiang Shu's back. The sight reminded him of their battle against Feng Qianyi in Hanguang Hall. The power of the Protector Martial God seemed to be activated under certain mysterious conditions—which Chen Xing didn't have time to contemplate in detail as Xiang Shu stepped forward on the terrace and shielded him.

Xiang Shu summoned his weapons with a gesture of his hand. The six magical instruments, manifested by the Acala Blade, began to orbit

around him. “I’ve had enough of you all,” he said coldly.

The drought fiend kings seemed to realize that they had no chance against the man before them. They each changed into black flames and tried to flee, but Xiang Shu wasn’t finished.

“Cowards!” he roared. “You want to escape?!”

The six weapons melded together into a golden ring that flew out with a hum and blocked the kings’ escape route. When Xiang Shu pulled his hands back, the golden light dispersed and the blade returned to his hands. It transformed again into a giant bow, and he shot an arrow made of light that pierced the three balls of black flame.

Forced back into their original forms, the drought fiend kings plummeted to the ground. The bow in Xiang Shu’s hand turned back into a sword. He swept it in an arc toward them, and a burst of golden flame swallowed the three drought fiend kings in an instant. The flame exploded outward in a hurricane that pulverized half the manor, then contracted around Xiang Shu’s body before finally dissipating.

“Ah…great,” Chen Xing mumbled.

“Chen Xing? Chen Xing! Xing-er! Xing-er—!”

Darkness swam in front of Chen Xing’s eyes, and he knew no more.

It was early morning in Chang’an. As the officials entered the court, Wang Ziye led the way, smiling serenely and making small talk. He turned his head to the side to glance at Murong Chong, who had recently returned to court, then nodded and smiled at him. Murong Chong’s face remained cold and sour; he clearly had no desire to greet Wang Ziye in return.

Suddenly, Wang Ziye stopped in his tracks, his smile freezing on his face. He turned to look toward the south.

“Wang-daren?” asked a civil official behind him. Wang Ziye’s face was white as a sheet, and his eyes had a sudden unfocused look to them.

Murong Chong approached and glanced curiously at Wang Ziye before gesturing for Wang Ziye to lead them into the hall. A worried look came over Wang Ziye’s face, and when he lifted his foot to mount the steps to the hall, he slipped and tripped on the stair.

“Wang-daren!”

“Wang-daren, be careful!”

Wang Ziye wiped his sweat away, barely managing to nod in response.

It was daytime, and at the Qin imperial court, discussion continued about the proposal to start a southern campaign. Seated on his throne, Fu Jian was close to nodding off. But the members of court noticed something strange: The one who had spearheaded the idea of the southern campaign in the first place had been none other than Wang Ziye, so why did Wang Ziye’s mind seem to be elsewhere?

He wasn’t the only one, either; even Fu Jian’s demeanor had grown troubled of late. Murong Chong, on the other hand, had always opposed the southern campaign. He had rushed back to Chang’an from Luoyang precisely for the sake of this matter.

Over the course of the day’s meeting, various officials brought up reasons to not embark on the southern campaign. Fu Jian didn’t get irritated. He just waved his hand and said, “I understand. This court session is over.”

But Murong Chong wasn't ready to let Fu Jian dismiss the court. "I have an observation. Would His Majesty be willing to listen?"

Wang Ziye lifted his head from this mess of a court to meet Murong Chong's gaze. It seemed he was finally realizing that he had an opponent.

"If you have something to say," Fu Jian said, unconcerned, "we wish to listen."

"I will say it only if Your Majesty is willing to listen."

The court's chilly atmosphere was warmed for once by a rare smile from Fu Jian. "Do tell."

Murong Chong's voice carried clearly through the quiet hall. "Your Majesty has worked hard in recent days, and I imagine that many of us have witnessed this. I'm confident that those who proposed this southern campaign to wipe out the Jin have considered the matter carefully. With that being said, indecision will only bring harm. Before my return to Chang'an, I believed that Your Majesty had already made up your mind—but looking at the situation today, it seems that there is still some distance to go before a consensus can be reached. While these honored officials debate whether to dispatch the troops, I imagine that Your Majesty has long since decided—"

"No." Fu Jian waved his hand, finally letting his gaze sweep properly over the gathered officials before it darted back to Murong Chong and, at last, Wang Ziye. "We do not hesitate over the question of sending out the troops; it is imperative that the southern campaign reclaim our lost territory, and there is nothing to debate on that front. We are mulling over whether we might employ a different method for gathering an army for the southern campaign."

Murong Chong raised an eyebrow. "What method?"

“The opportunity is not yet ripe. When the time comes, Wang Ziye will ensure everyone is informed. Now, the court is dismissed. Chong-er, you should come to the palace later to see Yan-er. He was, after all, almost like a true little brother to your sister when she was alive.”

Murong Chong’s brows knit together.

Deep in the gloomy underground of Huanmo Palace, a cold voice echoed. “What you’re protecting will one day betray you. Your hands are digging your own grave…”

Chen Xing was back in that scene from the underground palace, looking at the giant heart that hung in the middle of the chamber. Its arteries and veins webbed into the earth veins all around it, sucking out their energy.

He woke up with a start in a sunlit room, gasping for breath. At his side, Xiang Shu, who seemed to have been watching over him, whipped his head up to look at him. Chen Xing stared mutely back at him, then down at his own body. At some point, his clothing had been changed to a simple inner robe, and someone had tucked him under a blanket. The room he was in was redolent with the scent of medicine, and when he looked at his surroundings, he saw a small stove next to the bed where some medicinal herbs were bubbling away.

“Where am I?” Chen Xing asked weakly. “Hey, how long have I been asleep? It was really comfortable.”

For a moment, Xiang Shu just stared at Chen Xing. He looked dazed. Then he turned around and swept out of the room.

“He’s awake!” There was an actual tremor in Xiang Shu’s voice, albeit slight. “He woke up!” Seconds later, Xiao Shan rushed in and

pounced on Chen Xing with a loud shout.

“Xiao Shan?” Chen Xing asked, confused.

Xie Daoyun and Gu Qing followed him in briskly. “I’ll go tell Feng-dage,” said Gu Qing, and Xie Daoyun sat down to check Chen Xing’s pulse.

“It seems like I may have overused the Heart Lamp a little and damaged my meridians,” Chen Xing told her. “I take it I’ve been asleep for a good few days, then?”

Everyone in the room looked at him wordlessly. After another long stare, Xiang Shu turned around and started pacing back and forth, but his attention returned to Chen Xing before long. His lips were quivering, and the corners of his eyes were a bit red.

“All right,” Xie Daoyun said. “You’re awake now, so things are fine. You should rest.”

Chen Xing touched his stomach lightly. “I’m a little hungry.”

Xie Daoyun glanced at Xiang Shu. “That’s not my job to deal with anymore. It’s your turn.”

Xiao Shan hurried out of the room and came back with rations, which he handed over to Chen Xing. “Can’t you give the patient something easier to swallow?” Chen Xing complained. “Hey, Xiang Shu? What’s wrong?”

Xiang Shu let out a breath, looking a little overwhelmed. “Awake,” he murmured, giving Chen Xing a weak smile. “You’re awake, that’s good. Thank the heavens and the earth…”

Chen Xing’s head hurt. “Just how long was I asleep?”

“Three months,” said Xiao Shan.

Chen Xing had no idea how to reply.

Chapter 63

CHEN XING PUSHED the blankets aside to climb off the bed, but his legs gave out under him. Xiang Shu hurried to support him. “Sit a little while longer,” he told him. “I’ll go find someone to make you some food.”

While Xiang Shu was gone, Xie An arrived with all of his usual hubbub. He sighed. “You’re finally awake. I never thought things would get this serious.”

Nor could Chen Xing have predicted that one fight at Kuaiji would land him in a coma for three whole months! At his request, Xiao Shan had vividly narrated the events of that day. Chen Xing finally understood what had happened after Xiang Shu returned to Jiankang, tightly clutching Chen Xing’s unconscious body.

When he learned what had happened, Xie An had been extremely worried, and he helped Xiang Shu summon multiple doctors—including the royal physician—to look Chen Xing over. Their diagnoses were all the same: His meridians were injured, and recovery necessitated quiet rest. Only one apothecary, Pu Yang, who usually stayed by the emperor Sima Yao’s side, mentioned that Chen Xing’s condition had been seen before in the historical records. A coma was the expected consequence of using up too much of the soul. In a few days, he said, once the soul had had a chance to recover, Chen Xing might wake on his own.

The three immortal souls and seven mortal forms were an innate power that every person possessed. When the energy in the soul was fully used up, exhaustion hit; a mild case would see the person succumbing to an uneasy state of confusion, while in a severe case, they would fall into a

coma and eventually die. This was also why the patients who'd had a single immortal soul stolen from them by the Soulfall Bell experienced various degrees of drowsiness. Chen Xing's soul was still intact, but Xiang Shu had known exactly why Chen Xing was in a coma: In that last fight with the three drought fiend kings, he had somehow managed to pull the energy of Chen Xing's soul to him. In doing so, he had exhausted it completely.

Soul exhaustion was harmful to the body, but luckily, souls could slowly regenerate. As long as the person didn't die, their vital energies would gradually recover. So for three months, Xiang Shu had remained at Chen Xing's side, feeding him medicine and water and food, cleaning his body and turning him over, standing guard inside the room during the day, sleeping by his side at night…

"What?!" Chen Xing asked wildly. "He—He—I… How long did he let me go between baths? Did he feed me congee the whole time?"

"Ah… I don't know about the baths. Maybe you should ask Protector Xiang?" Xie An suggested. "That seems right, though. Mm, yes, he did feed you congee, and even though you were unconscious, you were able to swallow. A few times, when I came by, I saw Xiang-xiongdi feeding you congee and massaging your neck to make you swallow. Of course, when he sponge-bathed you, he closed the door."

"He really looked after me for…for three months?!" Chen Xing had no idea how he was going to repay this debt.

"You should rest properly," Xie An said as Xiang Shu brought the congee in. "Waking up is good, though, very good! Xiao Shan, Chen-xiongdi just woke up. Do you want to let him rest a bit?"

Xiao Shan had lain on top of Chen Xing and refused to budge, so Xie An shrugged and bade Chen Xing farewell. As soon as Xie An left, Xiao Shan rolled toward the wall, nonchalantly propping his ankle up on his knee and folding his arms behind his head.

“Eat some congee,” Xiang Shu said.

“I actually slept for three months?” Chen Xing asked. “Kuaiji is safe, right?”

Xiang Shu nodded. He moved to feed Chen Xing, but Chen Xing quickly refused. “I’ll do it on my own.”

Xiang Shu didn’t push; he just watched Chen Xing as he ate. Chen Xing’s arms felt limp and powerless, though he knew that this was just a consequence of sleeping for so long. After a few days of normal activity, his arms would recover their former strength.

Chen Xing felt hungry enough to eat an ox and, well, his only option was congee. At least congee was better than nothing. After he’d finished, he rubbed his stomach.

“Xie Daoyun says that you should eat soft foods for now,” Xiang Shu said. “After a few days, you can return to a normal diet.”

Chen Xing and Xiang Shu spoke at the same moment.

“For the past three months, you…”

“For the past three months, I…”

They both stopped. Xiang Shu gestured for Chen Xing to speak first, and Chen Xing’s lips twitched. He wanted to apologize for causing Xiang Shu such trouble over the past three months, but he was afraid he’d make

Xiang Shu angry. Anyway, if Xiang Shu was ill and unconscious, he would have done the same, so it didn't matter.

"It's nothing." Chen Xing shook his head and smiled a little.

"Did you dream?" Xiang Shu asked. "Do you not remember anything?"

Chen Xing actually had no idea. He just felt as if he'd had a good night's rest. The only "dream" he remembered was the brief moment in which he saw Chiyou's heart, but he suspected that was not actually a dream. He promptly explained it to Xiang Shu.

"The drought fiend kings seem to have all been taken care of." Chen Xing still remembered what he had seen right before he fell unconscious. Despite the painful consequences, they did manage to get rid of the drought fiend kings. The only one whose status was uncertain was Sima Wei.

Xiang Shu nodded. "Barring any unforeseen complications, the only one left is Shi Hai, whose identity we still don't know."

They had definitively disposed of five of the six drought fiend kings, and the sixth, Sima Wei, had been struck by lightning. The chess pieces that Shi Hai had carefully hidden in the south had been wiped off the board. Before, the road ahead had seemed thorny, and Chen Xing thought that walking it would be very difficult, but they'd made some great progress.

Xiao Shan tilted his chin up to look at Chen Xing, and Chen Xing patted his head. "Of the artifacts that were stolen from Zhang Liu," he said, "we've already managed to retrieve three: the Yin Yang Mirror, the Zheng Drum, and the Soulfall Bell." This had to have been a great blow to Shi Hai, wherever he was hiding.

Three more months of Chen Xing's life had slipped by, and his death date was that much closer. It had been an autumn day much like this one when Chen Xing left Mount Hua for Xiangyang two years ago. That meant that Chen Xing still had nearly two years left. Based on their progress so far, it was actually conceivable that they could take down Shi Hai before Sui Xing left and Chen Xing died.

Thinking back to what had happened in the city of Kuaiji, Chen Xing remembered something important. "That azure jiao was Xin Yuanping!"

"Can't we talk about something else?" Xiang Shu asked, starting to get irritated. "Why are you so fixated on these things?"

"Oh?" Chen Xing began to smile. "What should we talk about, then?"

Xiang Shu frowned. "I thought you would never wake up."

For some reason, Xiao Shan whistled. Chen Xing looked at him suspiciously, sensing some opaque meaning hidden in the whistle, but Xiao Shan just hopped off the bed and walked away.

"Xiao Shan?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu glanced back at Xiao Shan, then said to Chen Xing, "From today onward, you are forbidden from using the Heart Lamp."

"What? I don't have any other choice! Under the Silence of All Magic, the Heart Lamp's mana is the only mana left in the world. If I don't use it, what do you think will happen? Right now, we still don't know the location of the Dinghai Pearl, and—"

"If you keep using it like this, you'll die!" Xiang Shu's displeasure was evident.

Chen Xing just smiled. “Do I have a choice? Oi, Protector, I just woke up. Are we really arguing again already?”

Xiang Shu dropped it for the moment, and silence fell between them again. Thankfully, Feng Qianjun arrived soon after, clearly having just woken from his afternoon nap; in his rush to get to the Xie manor, he’d left his clothes in disarray. When he saw Chen Xing awake, he greeted him warmly, and the chilly tension between Xiang Shu and Chen Xing began to melt away.

“Your Heart Lamp is way too powerful,” Feng Qianjun said. “You only used it for a little while, and it made you fall asleep for three months. Who knows what will happen next time?”

Chen Xing was already feeling down from Xiang Shu’s scolding. “We’ll do what needs to be done,” he said stubbornly. “If it means we can get rid of Shi Hai, is any price too high to pay? There’s no point in me being the only one who survives. When Chiyou is revived, if everyone else is killed, then I’ll be done for anyway. What difference does it make?”

Xiang Shu silently rose to his feet and walked away. Chen Xing felt a little twinge of sadness as he watched him. He knew that Xiang Shu was afraid of him exhausting his energy reserves and dying, but what other choice did he have?

“If the Dinghai Pearl was found,” Feng Qianjun asked, “would that make things easier for you?”

“Theoretically, yes. Using mana would still impact my meridians, but the magic would at least prevent damage to my soul. Right now, it feels like a lot of what has happened was preordained by the heavens: the Heart Lamp

leading me to Xiang Shu, learning about Shi Hai's plans, journeying all the way here, and destroying the drought fiend kings."

Feng Qianjun smiled. "That's true. Don't you have the protection of Sui Xing? The worthy always receive help from the heavens. Whatever problems might arise, they can always be solved."

Chen Xing thought about this for a moment, then smiled back. "Yep."

Feng Qianjun had brought along some restorative tonics. "Now that you're awake, we'll have to find a time to celebrate properly with some wine," he said. "The news of you two defeating a jiao in Kuaiji is spreading all over Jiangnan, so you should rest up properly. And as for Xiang-xiongdi…" Feng Qianjun glanced at the door. "He looked after you for so long. Try not to upset him again."

"I really didn't mean to," Chen Xing replied glumly.

"He's my main investor, so you should try to comfort him a little," said Feng Qianjun. It didn't matter whether Chen Xing was any good at comforting people, because Feng Qianjun was something of an expert. With just a few sentences, he'd managed to make Chen Xing feel vindicated.

After Feng Qianjun left, Chen Xing mulled it over and finally decided to go talk with Xiang Shu. He had felt immeasurably calm when he woke up to see Xiang Shu beside him. Ever since Chen Xing's shifu had passed away, no one in the world was more concerned for his safety than Xiang Shu, and that thought made Chen Xing feel both discomfited and moved.

Chen Xing had used the Heart Lamp a number of times now, and each time, the aftereffects were stronger than the time before. And it became easier with each use for him to go all out. Through this process, he

realized, he was using the energy of his own soul as a replacement for the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth. Thanks to the Silence of All Magic, when he injected the energy of the Heart Lamp into Xiang Shu's body and sword, the spiritual qi that was usually used to vanquish demons wasn't available, and so instead he was forced to use his own soul.

The price he paid was that every time he used mana, whether to purify an artifact or draw out Xiang Shu's power as a protector, he was burning away his soul. And he was beginning to suspect that the day Sui Xing left him would be the day Xiang Shu stabbed the Acala Blade into the heart of the Demon God.

The future was becoming clear to him. He suspected—no, he was certain—that that was how it would end. When they faced down the Demon God, he would burn up the entirety of his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms to power the Acala Blade, allowing Xiang Shu to extinguish this last great threat to the Divine Land.

A glorious death in battle was, of course, something that Chen Xing could be satisfied with.

But Xiang Shu would probably be sad, he thought. He didn't know what the turning point had been, but he thought that on their journey from Chang'an to Chi Le Chuan, and from there to Jiangnan, their relationship had gradually become more like those he'd read about in the historical records: the bonds between exorcists and their protectors, where their hearts' desires were one and the same. That feeling of tacit understanding had been especially strong when Xiang Shu flew up to the terrace on the governor's manor to save him. He had clearly sensed Chen Xing's cry for help.

Standing alone in the hallway, Chen Xing thought about the companions he'd picked up along the way. Xiao Shan was a good kid, and Feng Qianjun wasn't bad. He'd never been brave enough to get too close to either of them, much less tell them about his impending demise. One day, he knew, they would part. If there were no strong feelings between them, then maybe, when the time came for him to leave, they wouldn't be too sad. Right?

But Xiang Shu was different. Chen Xing couldn't put a finger on it, but he knew the difference was there. He had felt it in Chi Le Chuan, during the Autumn Close Festival celebrations; when he watched Xiang Shu then, he'd felt a strange tug on his heart, even though he wasn't using the Heart Lamp.

Chen Xing sped up. Suddenly, he really wanted to see Xiang Shu. It hadn't occurred to him when he first woke, disoriented, but it occurred to him now that while his coma felt to him like a long nap, it must have been a long, anxious wait for Xiang Shu. He finally understood the emotions that had driven Xiang Shu to tell him not to use the Heart Lamp.

He found Xiang Shu sitting in front of his chambers, facing the courtyard under the clear autumn sky. His head was lowered as he studied a bamboo slip. Chen Xing stopped in his tracks, looking at Xiang Shu.

"How'd you end up here again?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu glanced up at Chen Xing. He was back to his usual demeanor, for all the world as if nothing had happened. "This is my room," he said. "You're awake, so I came back here. Is there a problem with that?" Chen Xing was silent for a moment. He knew that Xiang Shu was angry, but before he could direct them to a safer topic, Xiang Shu went on,

puzzlingly, as if he wasn't angry at all. "I'm looking at the slip about the Acala Blade."

"The Acala Blade," Chen Xing said thoughtfully. "Hmm… If we still had the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth available to us, it would be stronger."

"The Acala Blade can turn into six different artifacts," Xiang Shu said. "The Yao-Subduing Rod, the Yao-Binding Rope, the Golden Sun Ring, the Moon Eclipse Bow, the Golden Arrow, and its original form, the Sword of Wisdom. Zhang Liu made a sheath for it. 'The fetters of samsara bind unyielding; may they be severed by the Sword of Wisdom.' This is that same Sword of Wisdom."

"Samsara is just like a net. That's probably the meaning."

"Mhm." Xiang Shu sounded unusually serene. "We are all born with the dust of the common world clinging to us, and none of us can fully make peace with the cycle of life and death. Zhang Liu felt that the Sword of Wisdom could help people cut away their obsessions."

Chen Xing smiled. "Then for you to be the wielder of the Acala Blade—"

"During the three months that you spent in a coma," Xiang Shu interrupted, "I read quite a few of the old records left behind by the Xiang family. Xie An helped me find records from the Exorcism Department that were brought to Jiangnan when the capital was moved south, too."

"Did you find anything?"

Xiang Shu finally looked up from the slip at Chen Xing. His gaze was earnest, and his forehead was slightly furrowed, as if he knew that Chen Xing would become serious too when he brought up the subject of

exorcism. “I know one thing: Every time I use the Acala Blade, even in the moment when you awaken the magic in my body, all of the mana comes from you.”

Ah, Chen Xing thought, *you’ve finally noticed*. “Yes, that’s true,” he said stubbornly, “but exorcists and their protectors also have a mysterious connection between them—”

“If the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth hadn’t disappeared, we would be able to activate the Heart Lamp and the Acala Blade using that spiritual qi. But as things stand, you’re burning up your own soul to provide mana for the Acala Blade. Which is to say that every time we take down a yao, I’m using your lifeforce to do it.”

Chen Xing stopped talking.

“The same blade that cuts down drought fiend kings and monsters also cuts you down.”

“Don’t make it sound so serious!” Chen Xing protested, trying to explain. “As long as you give me a little time to recover after, I’ll get better —”

Xiang Shu’s voice became harsh. “You won’t get better! The consequences are worse each time! In Chi Le Chuan, when you were captured by Che Luofeng, you only sustained minor internal injuries; this time, after what happened in Kuaiji, you were in a coma for three whole months!”

Chen Xing wanted to argue, but Xiang Shu’s expression gave him pause. The person who was suffering the most in this situation, he realized, was Xiang Shu. Chen Xing shuddered to imagine what his reaction might be if he learned that Chen Xing had less than two years left to live. He’d

long since decided that Xiang Shu would never know, and he didn't ever want to argue with Xiang Shu about these things again.

They stared at each other wordlessly. It occurred to Chen Xing, in that moment, that he was harboring some strange emotion toward Xiang Shu. It was the same feeling he'd felt that day, after Xiang Shu fought off ten thousand enemies single-handedly as he made his way up the Yin Mountains to rescue Chen Xing, when he'd leaned up against the tree with a melancholic expression. Chen Xing wanted to give everything to Xiang Shu, to demonstrate that he understood Xiang Shu's feelings—but what did he have to give? He had nothing, not even himself.

Chen Xing had exhausted himself trying to suppress his overwhelming impulse to act. That impulse left as swiftly as it came, but it had hit him with the force of a runaway cart.

As he gazed at Xiang Shu, a strange urge came over him, telling him to scoot over and gently kiss Xiang Shu's lips. To show Xiang Shu that he *had* thought about this before.

Like a million birds skimming over a mountain's peak, brushing past its thousand-foot summit—or like a million shining fish leaping out of a moonlit ocean, their backs touching the night sky for just one moment—Chen Xing began, at last, to see the hazy shape of his own heart. In his final four years, the heavens had laid a bold, dark stroke down on his fate. He had done his best to avoid this outcome on the journey to where they were now, but there had been no place to escape. Xiang Shu was an inexorable part of his life.

"Say something!" Xiang Shu demanded.

“You’re really good.” Chen Xing smiled weakly. The tempestuous waves that had filled his heart for that brief moment eased off. “You’re handsome, and your heart is good too. I really like you, Xiang Shu. The luckiest moment of my life”—and here, the dejection returned—“was when I met you. To find a protector like you… If I think back to the previous Great Exorcists, I know I’ve been luckier than all of them.”

“You…” Xiang Shu got up and tossed the bamboo slip to the side.

“You’re right,” Chen Xing said, having thought things through. “But I also have something to tell you… Xiang Shu, I-I actually… I…”

Xiang Shu waved his hand: *Say no more*. “If we find the Dinghai Pearl and recover the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, you won’t need to take these kinds of risks again. Right?”

Chen Xing blinked. “Well, that might be true, but that isn’t what I wanted to talk about. I wanted—”

“I’m heading out tomorrow. Feng Qianjun will protect you while I’m gone.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“Back to Chi Le Chuan. The Dinghai Pearl has some connection with my mother, so there must be a clue there. I want to reinvestigate and go find this thing so that I can figure out what exactly that damned Zhang Liu did!”

“Chi Le Chuan has already been destroyed!” Chen Xing pointed out patiently. “Xiang Shu, there’s no use in you going there now. If Shi Hai came to Jiangnan, what would I do? Besides, if you go now, how long will it take you to get back?!”

Retracing Xiang Yuyan’s steps wasn’t necessarily a bad idea, but Chen Xing didn’t have much time left. He didn’t want them to split up, not

when Shi Hai's identity was still a mystery. Moreover, the likelihood that Dinghai Pearl was in Chi Le Chuan was slim; if it *was* there, Shi Hai, in his guise as Kjera, would have gone north more than once. He clearly had more complete information than they did, after all.

It occurred to Chen Xing that he could use this to dissuade Xiang Shu. "Now that I think of it," he said, "the entire reason Kjera went to Chi Le Chuan, and to Carosha, was to search for the Dinghai Pearl. And he was one of the only people who knew the truth of the matter. Do you think we could know more than him?"

Xiang Shu sucked in a long breath.

Chen Xing reached out, a little timidly, and gently touched the back of Xiang Shu's hand. It was a purely unconscious gesture, but Xiang Shu turned his hand over and grasped Chen Xing's. His grip was firm and steady, as if he was about to tug Chen Xing into his arms.

Suddenly, Chen Xing's heart began to beat wildly, and the Heart Lamp flashed, completely out of his control. Xiang Shu's eyes went wide, and he let go of Chen Xing's hand, staring at him mutely.

"Xiang Shu?" Chen Xing panted through labored breaths. "You have to understand, there are many things that I…"

But Xiang Shu turned his head, as if to avoid Chen Xing's gaze. "I've changed my mind."

"What?" Chen Xing asked, a little woozy.

Xiang Shu turned back to him, his brow smoothing out. In his eyes was the gentle gaze Chen Xing had grown used to. "I'll give up on vengeance. Until we figure out what happened to the Dinghai Pearl, I won't go seeking out Shi Hai to get my revenge."

“You… You said before…”

“Yes. But with how things are today, I cannot risk your life like that.” Emotions of all kinds roiled through Chen Xing. Xiang Shu continued, “The most important thing to me now is to find the Dinghai Pearl.”

“What if Shi Hai comes for us again? If he wanted to turn the citizens of Jiangnan into drought fiends, what would we do? Stand by and watch?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Xiang Shu promised.

“How will you take care of it?”

“I was once the Great Chanyu. Everyone who lived in Chi Le Chuan was under my protection. Now, I am your Protector Martial God, which means that I am also the Protector Martial God for everyone in the world. Whether they’re Hu or Han, they’re all people I must protect. I believe that success depends on the effort you put forth—and when I’m willing, there is nothing on this earth that I cannot accomplish.”

Chapter 64

CHEN XING was shocked by those words, and it took him a long time to shake the emotions they stirred in him. Physically, however, he recovered swiftly; within three days, he was moving freely again. It was thanks to Xiang Shu's meticulous care that he hadn't wasted away during his time unconscious and bedridden. A few days later, while dining with Xie An and the visiting Xie Daoyun, a thought struck Chen Xing: What if Xiang Shu, like Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan, was considering using resentment to command the Acala Blade?

When refined with resentment, ancient divine weapons like this took on entirely different properties. For instance, according to historical records, the Saber of Harmony and Life had once harnessed the world's spiritual qi to nurture growth and vitality. When infused with resentment, however, it became a dark blade that left desolation and decay in its wake. The Sky-Rending Claws were said to have summoned thunder to purify evil and filth, but in Xiao Shan's hands, they were a weapon that could tear through space itself.

If the Acala Blade succumbed to the dark path, its power might become uncontrollable. Worse, Chen Xing feared that prolonged use of resentment could affect Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun's minds. He would never want Xiang Shu, his Protector Martial God, to be tainted by resentment because he relied on that dark power to confront Shi Hai.

Chen Xing found himself stealing glances at Xiang Shu. He had always thought Xiang Shu was strikingly handsome, and now he seemed even more so. If looking at Xiang Shu had incited a pleasant sense of

admiration before, now it stirred something deeper, a faint ache in Chen Xing's chest. He wanted to talk to Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu's distant, unapproachable demeanor always stopped him short, and trying to get closer only bruised Chen Xing's pride. He was so frustrated he could have ground his teeth, torn between love and hate, itching to provoke Xiang Shu just to release some of these feelings.

"Have you found the location described on the map?" Xiang Shu asked Xie An suddenly.

Xie An nearly choked, caught off guard by the question. "One of them, possibly. Someone suggested it might be in the Longmen Mountains in Luoyang, but it hasn't been confirmed yet. I've sent some of my retainers ahead to verify it, to save you from making a wasted trip."

"The situation between the north and south sides of the Yangtze River is tense right now," added Xie Daoyun, "and Chen Xing, you've only just recovered. You ought to avoid traveling too much for the next six months."

"I'll take a trip to Mount Nanping one of these days," Xiang Shu said after a moment's thought.

"I'll go with you," said Chen Xing, remembering the second map.

"Your attempt to kill the jiao in Kuaiji has stirred up quite a commotion across the Jiangnan region," Xie An remarked. "What happened to the jiao?"

"Escaped," Xiao Shan replied.

A lot had happened during Chen Xing's three months of unconsciousness. For one thing, the Dongzhe Bank had almost completely collapsed. Some of its assets were swiftly seized by the Jin Emperor, who had been waiting for such an opportunity, and the remainder was squeezed

out by Feng Qianjun's Xifeng Bank. For the Wang family, who had supported Dongzhe Bank, it had been a calamity beyond their control. After much effort, they managed to retain a portion of their holdings and relocated their assets temporarily to Wu County. For the foreseeable future, they were in no position to compete with Xifeng Bank.

Feeling uneasy, Chen Xing finally voiced the question that was weighing on him. "What about Lin-daren?"

The messenger tasked with delivering the report had been intercepted and killed by Shi Hai's group. Evidence suggested that the messenger had kept his silence to the end and refused to reveal the investigation's findings no matter how much torture he underwent.

"Consider it a death in the line of duty," Xie An said, trying to comfort him. "Lin Yong never married. He was a native of Moling and a talented scholar from a young age…"

Sorrow washed over Chen Xing when he heard this. Xiang Shu frowned deeply, as if he wanted to say something, but he ultimately held his tongue. Fortunately, Xie Daoyun's next words did offer Chen Xing some small comfort.

"Lin Yong's parents and younger sister all fell ill with the plague six months ago. Thanks to your efforts, they've recovered. This was likely his greatest wish during his lifetime."

This was the only solace Chen Xing could cling to. "And what about Wu-daren and Zheng Lun?"

"They were injured," Xiang Shu replied, "but thankfully it was nothing life-threatening. They both recovered after a couple of months of bed rest."

Chen Xing breathed a sigh of relief. He still remembered those final moments vividly: Wu Qi and Zheng Lun, two court officials with scholarly backgrounds, standing before the drought fiend kings to protect him. For court officials to sustain such serious injuries was no small matter, especially since Wu Qi was the prefectural governor.

When news of the incident spread, it had sparked a heated debate across the Jin court that lasted for half a month. The reappearance of exorcists in the mortal realm became a hot topic. Emperor Sima Yao dispatched soldiers to search for the azure jiao, but to no avail. Over time, the uproar faded, and then news arrived from the north: Following heavy persuasion by Wang Ziye, Fu Jian had begun a massive conscription effort, preparing to launch a campaign the following year to march south and capture Jiankang.

This threw the entire Jin court into a state of anxiety. Xie An was overwhelmed with work, while the court officials, harboring a faint hope of avoiding disaster, watched events unfold and dispatched scouts to Guanzhong to gather information. Rumors spread like wildfire, stirring unrest both within the court and among the populace.

“I believe that Shi Hai is Wang Ziye,” Chen Xing said, unprompted. “We’ve taken the magical artifacts he needs for the Ten Thousand Spirits Arrays, so the arrays can’t be completed. On top of that, most of the drought fiend kings are gone. He will have had to find another way to convince Fu Jian to start a war. With death comes resentment, and with resentment, Shi Hai can act.”

As he spoke, Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu and found Xiang Shu looking back at him. Their eyes met for an instant before they both looked away awkwardly.

“It’s no surprise that there are charlatans in Fu Jian’s inner circle,” said Xie An, “but confirming Shi Hai’s identity is no easy task. Right now, Chang’an is sealed off from the Han people like an iron barrel. Not even our scouts can glean much useful information. I’m more worried that he may try to organize the drought fiend army you mentioned and ferry them across the river for an attack. If that happens, we’ll be in real trouble.”

As the national crisis loomed, Xie An showed unwavering dedication to duty. Over the past few days, his thoughts had been consumed with military matters. The idea of annihilating the Qin army and recapturing Chang’an and Luoyang? Impossible. He had enough self-awareness left to recognize that. The goal now was simply to push back the enemy forces and survive. His greatest fear was that the northern army might consist entirely of these living dead—and worse, that they might spread the plague and cause the Jin soldiers to collapse without a fight.

“I don’t think Fu Jian is quite so far gone yet,” Chen Xing said. “I was there when he wiped out hundreds of thousands of drought fiends. I saw it with my own eyes. If, for the sake of his southern campaign, he decided to use drought fiends as his army, that would be… It’s too…” Chen Xing trailed off, unsure of how to express it.

Xie An nodded. “The key issue now is that it’s difficult to get you to Luoyang.”

“I’ve heard,” Xie Daoyun put in, “that the court is preparing to send an envoy to Luoyang. Wang-daren suggested starting with Murong Chong. The Xianbei people don’t support a campaign in the south, and if Wang Ziye’s goals conflict with those of Murong Chong, then the Murong clan are our enemy’s enemy—they might be open to negotiating terms.”

Hope stirred in Chen Xing's heart, but Murong Chong had been convinced from the beginning that Xiang Shu had killed his sister. He feared it might not work.

"Is Murong Chong a reasonable person?" Chen Xing asked Xiang Shu.

"You're asking me? I'm not familiar with him. How would I know?"

"It depends on who he's dealing with," Xie Daoyun said thoughtfully. "I've heard some stories about Murong Chong. Let's just say…he's clever but cold-hearted. A man of strong temperament."

Chen Xing was a little surprised by this. "You hear talk about Murong Chong?"

"When it comes to handsome men," Xie Daoyun said, "there are always rumors in the streets. Girls love to talk about handsome men, don't they, Great Chanyu?"

Xiang Shu didn't rise to this bait, and Chen Xing quickly waved away Xie Daoyun's blunt remark.

Xie An thought for a moment, then said, "Well, it depends on what His Majesty decides. If Xiaoshidi is willing to meet with him in the palace, there may be an opportunity… Hmm… His Majesty has been insisting he must see the exorcists for some time now. Recently, he even proposed visiting you himself, but Daoyun chased him away from your doorstep—"

"Uncle!" Xie Daoyun protested.

"You dared to chase the emperor away?" Chen Xing asked, astonished. Xie Daoyun gave him a look that said this was only natural.

"You go ahead," said Xiang Shu. "I won't. I'm going to Chibi."

“If Xiang Shu isn’t going, then I’m not going either,” said Chen Xing. Xiang Shu shot him a wordless look.

“In ten days,” Xie Daoyun admonished them, “it will be the Autumn Deity Festival. All of Jiangnan is busy preparing for the holiday. We can go to Chibi after the festival—it’s not urgent. If you try to go now, you’ll find there are no boats or ships taking passengers. What’s a few more days?”

Xiang Shu had no choice but to agree.

Chen Xing thought about the earth deity festivals, which he hadn’t celebrated in many years. Back in the north, the festivals were divided into two: the Spring Earth Deity Festival and the Autumn Earth Deity Festival. The Spring Deity Festival usually took place around the second day of the second lunar month, also known as “Dragon Rising” in the north; the Autumn Deity Festival typically fell in the middle of the eighth lunar month, similar to the Hu people’s Autumn Close Festival. During these festivals, sacrifices were made to the heavens, the state, and the land to express gratitude for favorable weather, peace, and prosperity. The court was obligated to offer three sacrificial animals, with the ruler performing the ritual personally, and the common people prepared flowers, fruits, and ceremonial food to honor the earth. During the day, they tied red strings to trees, and in the evening, they gathered for a moonlit walk, lighting lamps, making offerings, and drinking wine.

This custom originated in the Central Plains. During the autumn lull, when the common people were no longer busy with agricultural work, they lit ceremonial fires and watched plays. Young men and women met at these gatherings, and those interested in each other could propose marriage. When Chen Xing was young, his father would take him and Yuwen Xin to the government quarters of Jinyang to drink and enjoy the festival food, and

he let the two of them watch the plays behind the beaded curtain while they ate sticky rice balls, sugar, and festival cakes. It had left a deep impression on Chen Xing.

After the southern migration, the north was left in turmoil for a long time, and the Han people eventually stopped celebrating their traditional festivals. The Hu people didn't even observe the Lantern Festival; they only celebrated the Autumn Close Festival and Lunar New Year's Eve. The south, however, preserved many customs from the Central Plains, which felt warm and familiar to Chen Xing.

A few days later, Chen Xing had fully recovered. Every day, in the Xie residence, he spent time teaching Xiao Shan how to read, write, and speak. Taichu Palace sent someone to check on him again and, knowing that further delay was impossible, Xie An had clothes made for Chen Xing and the others. On the day before the Deity Festival, when the imperial court began its holiday, Xie An took Chen Xing and the others to the palace to meet Emperor Sima Yao.

Chen Xing's family had been scholars for generations, and he knew that a significant portion of the responsibility for the chaos of the Yongjia Rebellion decades ago fell on the Sima family themselves. On top of that, Sima Yao was aware of Chen Xing's status as Xie An's junior, and so he treated him politely. As a result, Chen Xing didn't feel much fear or awe toward the emperor. And Xiang Shu had been the Great Chanyu of the north, a figure even Fu Jian feared; he would never show a Han emperor deference or courtesy.

Feng Qianjun, meanwhile, had been born into a humble yet prominent local family. None of his relatives held high official positions or

had received great rewards, but the family had nonetheless accumulated wealth and produced many scholars. The Feng family had climbed the ladder to become one of the most influential local families, on par with the likes of the Wang and Xie families, and they were just waiting for the right opportunity. Naturally, they were also a target of Emperor Sima Yao's efforts to curry favor.

But Xiao Shan was seeing a Han emperor for the first time, and he was full of curiosity. Chen Xing knew that he was the most likely member of their party to cause problems.

"You're a descendant of Great Chanyu Huhanye and Zhaojun," he told Xiao Shan. "You don't need to kowtow to our emperor. Just treat him like an ordinary person and don't make a scene. Otherwise, I'll leave you at home next time."

Xiao Shan nodded. The boy had shot up like a weed since they met in Carosha; he came up to Chen Xing's shoulder now. He no longer allowed himself to be carried, though he was still slender and had a delicate, youthful look.

After all the time they'd spent traveling around Jiangnan, it had been ages since Chen Xing was able to enjoy unhurried days like these. Back when he traveled to Chang'an with Xiang Shu, they'd had the luxury to have clothes made, take baths, and visit friends and relatives. By contrast, since settling in Jiankang, Chen Xing had worn the same two sets of clothes for several months. Now, he had a new outfit, made with fabric he'd chosen and tailored to his preferences. It was a set of martial robes in white and pale gold. Though the robes were styled after the Jin's Han clothing, they carried subtle modifications of the sort worn by the Central Plains people.

The four of them had all received martial robes, each different in design but similar in small details, akin to the official uniforms of the Exorcism Department. This had been a small request of Chen Xing's. While he was still around, he hoped to treat this as the re-establishment of the Exorcism Department. Mana had not yet returned to the world, and the legend of the exorcists had long faded, but, at least in the present, the four of them were real and alive.

In their new outfits, Xiao Shan looked like a charming little gentleman, and Feng Qianjun could have been a refined young master from Jiangnan; all he needed was a folding fan to complete the look. They looked okay, but when Xiang Shu changed into his new clothes, he became radiant.

They entered the palace. The servants inside seemed unable to keep from staring at the four exorcists, Xiang Shu most of all. In Chen Xing's eyes, Xiang Shu had transformed back into the glorious figure of the grasslands' Great Chanyu. Compared to the bold and unrestrained arrogance he'd shown in Chang'an, the current Xiang Shu appeared more restrained, his sharp edges smoothed out; but his bright eyes still carried a subtle darkness, and he retained his calculating look and the domineering air that said he was above the laws of the world.

"You look good," Chen Xing said, half envious and half admiring. Xiang Shu glanced at him and didn't reply, but his gaze softened a little at Chen Xing's praise.

Xie An led the four of them to the front of Taichu Palace. "Xiaoshidi, I'll go check on the arrangements for tomorrow's imperial sacrificial rites.

You all wait here for a moment. The emperor is easygoing; there's no need to be formal."

"Don't worry, we won't be formal," Chen Xing replied, thinking, *You didn't see the way Xiang Shu stormed the imperial palace in Chang'an. Standing outside in an orderly manner is already showing the Jin people plenty of respect.*

With Xie An gone, only the four exorcists remained in front of the palace. Feng Qianjun furrowed his brow slightly. "This will be my first chance to see the emperor since we returned to Jiangnan. I wouldn't have this opportunity if it wasn't for you."

Chen Xing chuckled. "Why do I always get the sense that you're angling for something?"

Feng Qianjun opened his mouth to reply, but in the end he stopped short. Chen Xing didn't miss the look on his face, but whatever he'd been about to say, he thought better of it.

They all fell silent for a while. Ever since their conversation a few days ago, Chen Xing had sensed some tension between himself and Xiang Shu. It felt like something was simmering beneath the surface, even though, when they spoke to each other, everything seemed perfectly normal.

"Xiang Shu?" Chen Xing asked cautiously. Xiang Shu shot him an inquisitive look. Chen Xing had been about to make a joke, warning Xiang Shu not to go inside and start a massacre, but he second-guessed himself now, afraid he might say the wrong thing and upset Xiang Shu. Before he could think of something else to say, a eunuch approached them holding a box, which he opened in front of Xiang Shu.

“These flowers,” said the eunuch, “are a gift from the emperor to the exorcists. Please take them. You are free to roam the palace today.”

“The emperor has such refined taste,” Feng Qianjun remarked.

The box contained four begonias. Understanding the palace’s customs, Feng Qianjun picked one up and pinned it to his clothes. Chen Xing copied him, pinning one to himself and another to Xiao Shan’s collar.

“Is this another Han custom?” asked Xiang Shu.

“Pinning flowers on our clothes when we go out is a refined tradition of ours,” Chen Xing confirmed cheerfully. “You should follow along with the local customs.”

As Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan wandered over to the palace’s side garden, Xiang Shu declined the flower. “I don’t want it.”

Chen Xing picked up the final begonia and pulled Xiang Shu over to him. “Don’t move,” he said, and pinned the flower to Xiang Shu’s robe. “See, it looks nice.”

Seemingly apropos of nothing, Xiang Shu said, “Tomorrow, you…”

Chen Xing raised his eyebrows, waiting for the rest of that sentence, but then someone emerged from Taichu Palace. Without Chen Xing needing to ask, the person announced, “Chen-daren, Great Chanyu Shulü, Feng Qianjun-gongzi, and Xiao-daren, His Majesty requests your presence.”

“We’ll talk later,” Chen Xing told Xiang Shu, and then he called Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan back to follow him into the hall.

Inside, there was a large painting: the *Nymph of the Luo River* by Gu Kaizhi. Emperor Sima Yao sat at the center of the hall in a white robe threaded with gold, his hair loosely draped over his shoulders and a begonia

pinned to his collar. He was sitting on a couch, chatting and laughing with a Daoist priest at his side. To the left sat Xie Shi, the Yellow Gate Attendant, and Xie Xuan, the Minister of Rites, both of whom Chen Xing had met when he first arrived in Jiankang for informal talks.

Sima Yao stood the moment he saw Xiang Shu and cupped his hands in an imperial salute. “Great Chanyu Shulü! How are you? We heard that you traveled a long way to reach Jiankang. We should have arranged to meet earlier, but you must have been busy. It’s fortunate we are meeting today. Your great reputation precedes you, and We are truly honored to meet you.”

Following Hu custom, Xiang Shu placed his hand on the left side of his chest, flipped his hand outward, and nodded; then he returned the salute. In doing so, he observed the proper royal protocol for both of their countries. “You’re too kind. I’ve recently passed my position on to Shi Mokun. My current title is Protector of the Great Exorcist, Chen Xing.”

A complicated mix of emotions swelled in Chen Xing. It was the first time Xiang Shu had introduced himself as Chen Xing’s protector. He smiled and performed the proper bow. “Commoner Chen Xing, courtesy name Tianchi, pays his respects to Your Majesty.”

Feng Qianjun made as if to salute as well, but Sima Yao said quickly, “No need for such formalities, esteemed…masters. Please sit down. Ah, how difficult it’s been to meet you, Chen-xiansheng! Come, let Us introduce you all. This is Pu Yang-xiansheng. When you were unconscious, Chen-xiansheng, Pu-xiansheng went to see you.” The elderly Daoist priest beside Sima Yao nodded in acknowledgment.

Chen Xing introduced Xiao Shen. Then, having heard from Xie Daoyun and Xie An that this emperor wasn't particular about formalities, he made his way over to sit beside Xie Xuan, saying, "Move over a bit."

Xie Xuan smiled and shifted obligingly. "I'll be leaving soon, as I have other matters to attend to. Tianchi, you can continue to talk with His Majesty." He and Xie Shi both excused themselves and left.

Smiling, Sima Yao appraised the four of them one by one and asked a few questions about their time in Jiankang. Chen Xing exchanged pleasantries with him, and it became clear that although the emperor resided deep in the palace, he wasn't idle; he was already well-informed about their activities.

"Speaking of Kuaiji," Sima Yao said, "We must express Our gratitude. Chen-xiansheng, you must know what Our title was before We ascended the throne."

Feng Qianjun stepped in. "Your Majesty was the Prince of Kuaiji."

"Ah." Chen Xing hadn't known that, in fact. That must have been the source of Sima Yao's gratitude.

"We owe you a great deal," said Sima Yao. "You relieved the suffering of the people in the south and eradicated the plague in one fell swoop."

Chen Xing had assumed Sima Yao wanted to meet simply because he was curious about exorcists, but now he was discussing state matters. Chen Xing felt a bit more respect for him. "Exorcising demons and subduing yao is our duty. Xiao Shan, stop fiddling with things. What did I tell you before we came in?"

From the moment he set foot in the palace, Xiao Shan had been trying to touch everything, even going so far as to lift the table to look underneath. Sima Yao laughed heartily; he knew how troublesome children could be at that age. “Worry not, worry not. Daoyun is in the palace; why not let her take Xiao-xiansheng around for a walk? Do you like weapons, Xiao-xiansheng? We happen to have a weapons vault. You could take a look.”

He summoned Xie Daoyun to come and lead Xiao Shan to the weapons vault, which was an immense relief to Chen Xing. “Xiao Shan is actually quite good at fighting,” Chen Xing said. “It’s just that he’s still growing. I ask for Your Majesty’s understanding.”

“So We’ve heard,” Sima Yao replied with a polite smile. “In fact, We’ve heard that you exorcists are undefeated in battle.”

As usual when this topic came up in conversation, Chen Xing had no shame. “If all martial arts in the world amount to ten sacks of rice, then Shulü Kong, the Great Chanyu, has eight of them. Xiao Shan has one, and the rest, including Fu Jian, share the remaining one.” Sima Yao had no response to this. “If things were otherwise, what hope could we have of defeating Shi Hai? I assume Your Majesty has heard of him.”

Sima Yao nodded slowly. “We received a report from Minister Xie. We never expected this sorcerer to stretch his evil hand to Jiangnan and kill officials of Our court—”

Chen Xing’s heart skipped a beat. Xiang Shu whipped his head up and shot Sima Yao a meaningful frown.

Sima Yao faltered halfway through his sentence, looking confused. “What’s wrong?”

“Which court officials?” Chen Xing asked.

Sima Yao realized the problem then, but it was too late: He’d already spoken, and backtracking now would make things worse. “Wu Qi and Zheng Lun both died three months ago during the Battle of Kuaiji. We have compensated the families of those who sacrificed their lives in the battle. Please don’t take it to heart, Chen-xiansheng.”

Xiang Shu sipped his tea. He looked irritated, his eyes full of reproach. Chen Xing’s heart sank into his stomach.

“Oh… Is that so… Mm…”

“Sima Yao,” Xiang Shu cut in, “as the ruler of a nation…”

This isn’t good, Feng Qianjun thought. Xiang Shu had been keeping this secret to spare Chen Xing the guilt. Sima Yao letting the truth slip was likely to lead to an outburst. Feng Qianjun opened his mouth to interrupt, but Xiang Shu raised a hand to silence him.

“…Your information must be more up-to-date than ours. Let me ask you this: What is the situation in the north right now?”

Sima Yao answered seriously, unbothered by Xiang Shu’s tone. “That is precisely the reason I invited you all here—to discuss Fu Jian. Not long ago, in the Qin court, Wang Ziye strongly advocated for a southern campaign. They’ve begun to assemble an army and intend to invade our Great Jin after the new year. According to the intelligence we’ve received, the first target will be Shouxian.”

“Then you must be desperate,” said Xiang Shu, while Chen Xing maintained his silence.

Sima Yao raised his eyebrows. Chen Xing quickly shot a look at Xiang Shu, but Sima Yao understood that Xiang Shu was trying to provoke

him. “Desperate?” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Feng Qianjun had his own intelligence network. “Shi Mokun has not given the Purple Scroll to Fu Jian,” he told Xiang Shu, “and the tribes of Chi Le Chuan currently have no plans to engage in battle.”

Xiang Shu ignored him. “The northern army is set to march south in the spring. As a Han emperor, shouldn’t you be rallying troops to defend your territory instead of wasting time here asking exorcists these questions?”

Sima Yao sighed and raised his hands in resignation. “It’s because there is still one thing on Our mind, Great Chanyu—”

“I’m no longer the Great Chanyu,” Xiang Shu reminded him.

“Martial God,” Sima Yao amended. “That title is acceptable, right? You put it simply, and We won’t play word games with you. Do you know that Wang Ziye has been secretly assembling a drought fiend army for Fu Jian?”

Chen Xing sat up straight. “What?!”

Sima Yao stood up and paced around the hall before turning back to Xiang Shu. “Our scouts have reported that a fully enclosed military camp has appeared north of Luoyang, at the foot of the Longmen Mountains. According to rumors from the people of Luoyang, there are hundreds of thousands of drought fiends there. It sounds unbelievable, but We’ve seen them Ourself. If I’m not mistaken, after the fall of Xiangyang and Zhu Xu’s defection, one of those living dead was—”

“That’s right,” Feng Qianjun interrupted. “It was I who sent him back to Mai City.” Xiang Shu remained silent, his face set in a deep frown.

“But,” Sima Yao went on, “it seems that Murong Chong has noticed and is trying to stop this. The rumors say that Chang’an is divided into two factions. One, led by the Xianbei Murong family, is mobilizing the Di, the Xiongnu, and other tribes in opposition to Fu Jian’s southern campaign. The other is led by Wang Ziye, and they advocate launching a full-scale attack in the spring of next year.”

“A full-scale attack?” Xiang Shu scoffed. “Fu Jian relies on either sheer numbers or luck in battle. What troops does he have? Let me see the marching route.” Only Xiang Shu would dare to mock Fu Jian like that.

Sima Yao didn’t delay. “Pu Yang,” he said, turning to the Daoist priest beside him, “go to Our study and bring me the map.”

Xiang Shu’s military prowess exceeded Chen Xing’s own. Just as Chen Xing was unmatched when it came to discussing scholarly matters with his peers, when the subject turned to Fu Jian’s southern campaign, no one knew more than Xiang Shu about troop strength, deployment, and combat strategies.

“Murong Chong’s stance sometimes confuses me,” Chen Xing said.

“Murong Chong’s stance is simple,” replied Xiang Shu. “It’s the Murong family’s stance.”

“Feng-qing?”[6] said Sima Yao. “I remember your family used to operate in Luoyang. You must be quite familiar with the Murong family.”

Feng Qianjun nodded. “Their only goal is to restore their kingdom. Fu Jian is using Luoyang as a base, and he’s following Wang Ziye’s advice to raise the drought fiend army. That will keep the Murong family busy. Moreover, if the southern campaign succeeds, the Qin Empire’s prestige

will grow as its territory expands, and the Murong family's hopes of restoring their state will be dashed."

The Daoist priest returned with a scroll and spread it out on the imperial desk.

"Based on our calculations," Sima Yao said, "Fu Jian plans to split his forces into three. The first force will be led by the Five Hu—ah, the five tribes in Guanzhong. Martial God, will you take a look?" He stumbled over his words slightly, not wanting to disrespect Xiang Shu by saying the word "Hu" in his presence—its literal meaning, after all, was "barbarian."

"I am indeed a Hu," Xiang Shu replied coldly. "There's no need to mince words. I assume the second group is his secret army in Luoyang."

Sima Yao nodded. "That's right. The third of his forces will consist of troops who have defected from Pengcheng, Huaiyin, Xiapi, and Xuyi. These three forces will converge at Jiangjun Ridge near Feixi and Shouxian. Our best guess is that their total number will not be less than five hundred thousand. The first battle to take place in the spring of next year may be—"

"At Fei River," Xiang Shu said solemnly. "If I were Fu Jian, I would choose to cross the Fei River and march south to Jiankang." Sima Yao nodded in agreement. "How many soldiers do you have?"

Sima Yao sighed. "Including the Beifu army, We have fewer than one hundred thousand."

Xiang Shu was unfazed. "A small force can defeat a large one. It's not impossible."

Chen Xing had not expected this casual meeting with Sima Yao to turn into a discussion about how to save the Jin Empire. The common

people in Jiankang and Jiangnan had no idea that disaster was looming, but the situation in the north was already becoming critical.

Now that he'd explained the situation, Sima Yao fell silent and returned to his throne. This was when Pu Yang, the Daoist priest, finally spoke.

"That is why," he said, "His Majesty has invited you here regarding a matter with which he seeks your assistance."

Chapter 65

"IT IS OUR DUTY to eliminate Fu Jian's drought fiend army," Chen Xing said promptly. "This matter is unrelated to the conflict between Hu and Han; it's just something that we must do."

"Ah, no, no, no," said Pu Yang hastily. "Regarding the drought fiend army, no one is certain yet whether it really has such power. In any case, Chen-xiansheng was invited here because His Majesty wants to ask…"

This confused Chen Xing, and Xiang Shu knitted his brows. Pu Yang's expression grew uncomfortable.

"Let Us say it," said Sima Yao, steeling himself. "Chen-xiansheng, We ask for guidance, since you are all exorcists. Is there a way to…take Fu Jian's head from a thousand miles away?"

Everyone was stunned speechless.

"We can provide everyone with bodhimandas to practice magic," Sima Yao continued, in all earnestness. "It is said that exorcists are omnipotent and can move unobstructed both in the sky and on land. So just launch a flying sword from Jiankang and shoot it toward Chang'an to take Fu Jian's head. After that, bring his head back, and We will use it to demonstrate Our power. This way, the army will collapse by itself."

"Your Majesty…" Chen Xing croaked out.

Xiang Shu took a deep breath, likely trying not to laugh. Sima Yao had spent such a long time analyzing everything only to arrive at this illogical suggestion. It was so absurd none of them could quite wrap their heads around it.

“Pu Yang-xiansheng also told Us that a thousand years ago, the exorcists—”

“Your Majesty, it can’t be done. This is truly beyond our power,” Chen Xing interjected apologetically.

“Oh,” Sima Yao said with a hint of disappointment.

After a long, awkward moment, Pu Yang said, “I did previously emphasize this point, Your Majesty. Perhaps there is…another course of action to consider?”

But Sima Yao wasn’t ready to give up. “Well, We can give up on the head. Does Chen-xiansheng have any incantations that can make Fu Jian die suddenly overnight?”

“Not at the moment,” Chen Xing said. “Your Majesty, I must inquire: If such a spell existed, would it not have already caused widespread disruption?”

“A few days ago, a great master came from Jiao Province. He told Us that if Our intention was sincere, and if We prayed to the heavens every day, the heavens would make Fu Jian die a sudden death.”

“Indeed, indeed. In fact, I suspect there may be some experts on Fu Jian’s side as well who hope to wield magical arts against Your Majesty. And, um, Your Majesty…surely it would be a missed opportunity for Fu Jian not to at least try such an expedient method. But Your Majesty remains alive and well, right?”

Sima Yao sighed. “We have almost gone bald with worry, Chen-xiansheng! For the past three months, We have been waiting patiently for you to awaken so that We can discuss this matter with you, and you tell Us it’s impossible?” He smoothed back his hair, letting Chen Xing and the

others see his hairline. “See? We can’t sleep peacefully at night, We can’t eat during the day…”

“I can prescribe a calming decoction for Your Majesty to drink, actually,” said Chen Xing.

Sima Yao’s face was grim. “Let Us ask another question. If you can’t make Fu Jian die a sudden death, then…can you make Our hair grow back?”

“Not as such…but I can write a prescription for hair growth. Still, I must strongly advise against excessive consumption of fleeceflower root due to its toxic properties.”

Sima Yao had no response to that.

“Yes, that’s it!” Chen Xing exclaimed, saying aloud what he knew Sima Yao was thinking. “I can’t do anything but emit light! So what?”

This left Sima Yao with no choice but to drop the subject.

Now it was Chen Xing’s turn to ask about something. “The situation in Luoyang…”

“Chen-xiansheng,” said Sima Yao, “there is no cause for alarm regarding the disaster in Luoyang. Whether this so-called drought fiend army is beneficial or detrimental to Our cause still remains to be seen. We and the court officials have witnessed the living dead firsthand, and their actions are entirely beyond control. We feel that any attempt to use these creatures for his army will backfire on Fu Jian long before it can cause trouble for Us.”

Chen Xing furrowed his brow. “How could Your Majesty say such a thing? If the drought fiend army were to spiral out of control, living people would die! We’ve spared no effort controlling this drought fiend chaos, but

if they went rampant and turned all of Fu Jian's troops into living corpses, does Your Majesty believe that the Jin army could repel them?"

"Chen-xiansheng, We know that you see Hu and Han only as 'people' and make no distinction between them. But you must understand that Our 'people' are the Han people of Jiangnan. We must protect them from being flattened by the Qin."

"So I presume Your Majesty is unwilling to assist us in sneaking into Luoyang?"

Chen Xing's goal for this meeting was to persuade Sima Yao to send a delegation to Luoyang, with himself, Feng Qianjun, Xiang Shu, and Xiao Shan hiding among them so that they could investigate the matter of the Dinghai Pearl. He hadn't expected to hear such shocking news. From the discussion between Sima Yao and his ministers, it was clear that they preferred to follow Sun Tzu's advice: foil the enemy's plans, isolate the enemy from their allies, and only engage them in battle as a last resort. Avoiding outright conflict unless absolutely necessary was understandable; Jiangnan was, after all, still recovering from the Yongjia Rebellion a century ago. The ordinary people were unwilling to fight in a war, and they even tacitly approved of the government's split between the north and south factions.

Therefore, Sima Yao's top priorities were to drive a wedge between the Murong clan and Fu Jian, and to sow discord inside the Qin court to alienate the Five Hu living inside the pass. If they were too busy to fight one another, they wouldn't have time to march south. The scouts might even be ordered to release some drought fiends in order to cause more chaos for the Qin.

Sima Yao had tried sending his spies to breach the military camp before, but the operation had failed. “It’s hard to say, Chen-xiansheng…”

“Please look at the four characters above your head, Your Majesty,” Chen Xing said.

Sima Yao smiled but didn’t look up. Xiang Shu followed Chen Xing’s gaze and saw that four characters written by Wang Dao hung above the *Nymph of the Luo River* painting: “The Country Yet Endures.”

Wang Dao had been an official who performed an important service during the Southern Crossing. He had also been the head of the prominent family that, after the Yongjia Rebellion, gave rise to the saying that “the Wang family and the Ma family shared the world”; the Wang family’s power had long been evenly matched with the imperial Sima family. Though he had been dead for forty-two years now, his writings still served as a reminder to the Sima family.

“Every day of every month of every year,” Sima Yao said, “someone reminds Us of it. Save your breath, Chen-xiansheng.”

“The people of the Central Plains, Hu or Han, are also Your Majesty’s people. Say the old hatred between the two states is enough to make Your Majesty sit back and watch innocents die in this drought fiend chaos. On the day Your Majesty restores the homeland, would Your Majesty not feel restless thinking of all the departed souls of the Central Plains under the dragon throne?”

Chen Xing spoke solemnly, but Sima Yao just smiled. “You really are a descendant of a renowned scholar. It’s said that you debated scions of prominent families during light intellectual conversation, leaving them all speechless and unable to argue. We see now that this reputation is well-

earned. But Chen-xiansheng, even if We wanted to treat the Hu as Our people, would the Han in Jiangnan do the same?"

"So, having failed to recapture the Central Plains," Xiang Shu said dispassionately, "you people created a mess and now leave your fate in someone else's hands."

"The Great Chanyu exaggerates. I've contemplated this question more than once. If, during Our lifetime, We are lucky enough to accomplish that goal, how can We face you outside tribes?"

Xiang Shu looked at Sima Yao. It was only thanks to his change in identity that there was no trace of anger in his gaze. When he'd held the position of the Great Chanyu, anyone who brought up the enmity between the Hu and the Han with him faced his wrath. He didn't always teach them a lesson, but he never let them off easy.

"It has been Our experience," Sima Yao continued, "that the place from which people come is the place to which they return. Your clansmen will yet return to you; the Great Wall is their border. Let's leave it at that for now. The road ahead is full of hardships, and We still don't know which path to choose…" He turned to Chen Xing. "We understand what Chen-xiansheng means, and We will take it into serious consideration. You want to go to Luoyang, and you need Our help to do so. We are experiencing difficulties of our own, but in light of the exorcists' feat in assuaging the mayhem in Kuaiji, We will do Our utmost to help as a demonstration of Our Great Jin's gratitude. We are not, after all, Fu Jian. You and We are of the same stock, Chen-xiansheng, and We hope that you, too, think of your own clansmen whenever possible. And if the information We've received is to be believed, then is half of the Great Chanyu's lineage not also Han like us?"

Xiang Shu remained silent. Chen Xing knew that to discuss Xiang Shu's mixed heritage here would be to make the subject common knowledge, so he said only, "Maybe we will have a chance to continue the discuss the matter of the Hu and the Han after we've quelled the drought fiend problem. In a situation like this, we really shouldn't dwell on ethnic differences."

"Yes, what Chen-xiansheng says is very true, very wise." Sima Yao nodded. Chen Xing knew that this meant he was sending them away.

He was just about to ask for permission to withdraw when the Daoist Pu Yang spoke up. "Please stay for a moment, Chen-xiansheng. I have one thing I wish to confirm with you." Chen Xing raised his eyebrows. Pu Yang hesitated, then asked, "Are you able to divine a person's fate?"

"A little bit. I've learned to read natal charts. Why?"

"Would you read His Majesty's personal fortune and the country's fate?"

"Yes, is that possible?" Sima Yao asked, smiling.

From Pu Yang's expression, Chen Xing suspected the man was really asking on his own behalf. He acquiesced. "Certainly, but His Majesty's birth date characters and birth star… These things aren't to be revealed to other people, are they?"

Chen Xing honestly didn't want to have anything to do with this. A moment ago they'd been discussing how to make someone die a sudden death. If the emperor gave Chen Xing his birth date and then some unexpected accident befell him in the future, Chen Xing would be in a tight spot.

“There’s no harm.” Pu Yang fetched a yellow paper. “I wrote out the information for you in advance. I only want to show you part of it.”

If you had the information ready in advance, why did you have to tell me it was His Majesty’s? Chen Xing thought. *You could have said it was some random person’s! I wouldn’t have suspected a thing!* Sima Yao was the monarch of the country, so the country’s fate was bound to be intertwined with his; they could have just left it at that.

He took the paper and looked at it. It was only part of the emperor’s natal chart, but he could still barely hide the shock in his eyes when he saw it.

“I looked at it once, three years ago,” said Pu Yang, “but I have little talent and shallow understanding. Now that I’ve met an expert, I’d like to ask for some advice so that I can feel at ease.”

“Well…” Chen Xing looked up from the paper and met Pu Yang’s meaningful gaze. He understood everything now. According to what was shown in the natal chart, Sima Yao wouldn’t live to see forty. He would die an unnatural death in his thirties because of his own arrogance.[7] Sima Yao would live for around a decade to come, but not much more. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, this year…”

Sima Yao was two years younger than Xiang Shu and had just turned twenty. He smiled and replied, “We’re just approaching Our coming-of-age ceremony.”

Pu Yang clearly hadn’t told Sima Yao about this matter yet. He must have experienced quite a shock when he first looked at the natal chart, and he gave it to Chen Xing to confirm the truth. And to prevent Chen Xing from speaking too bluntly after he looked at the chart, Pu Yang had

informed him in advance that the chart he was reading was Sima Yao's so that he wouldn't say it out loud.

"Your Majesty," Chen Xing said when he'd finished looking at the chart, "I implore you to avoid excessive arrogance or willfulness. It may seem impertinent for me to offer such advice, but I believe that if Your Majesty maintains a magnanimous demeanor, you will avoid significant disasters in this life."

Sima Yao turned his smile on Pu Yang. "That's exactly what the State Teacher has told Us."

Pu Yang nodded and, deducing that Chen Xing had also seen what he had seen, said nothing more. Chen Xing opened his mouth to ask for permission to withdraw, but this time, Feng Qianjun interrupted him.

"Your Majesty, if I may be so bold, I wish to request a favor. Would Your Majesty bestow upon me the esteemed honor of marriage?"

"Oh? That girl from the Gu family? It shall be done." Sima Yao had clearly heard about his betrothal from Xie Daoyun.

Feng Qianjun hadn't expected that to go so smoothly. He relaxed at once, and he quickly kowtowed and thanked Sima Yao for his generosity. As a prominent family in Jiangnan, the Gu family had always looked down on the Feng family, which had wealth but no government officials in its ranks. Now, with an imperial edict, Feng Qianjun could propose marriage to the Gu family. And the royal family still owed the Xifeng Bank seven hundred thousand taels of silver, so they had to show him some respect.

Sima Yao turned back to Chen Xing. "Chen Tianchi, do you need Us to bestow a marriage upon you?"

"Huh?"

Sima Yao's switch from calling him "Chen-xiansheng" to "Chen Tianchi" made the conversation sound a bit more intimate. The emperor laughed. "If you agree to carefully consider Our proposal, We will consider recognizing you as Our blood brother. A prince of my Great Jin would be on equal footing with the Great Chanyu…"

This again?! "Why on earth do you all want to arrange marriages for me?" Chen Xing blurted out. "This is the second time an emperor has tried to act as my matchmaker!"

Xiang Shu stared blankly for a moment, not understanding—and then a very strange expression came over his face. Sima Yao burst out laughing.

"I'm going back to research that idea of taking Fu Jian's head from a thousand miles away," Chen Xing said, because he didn't, after all, need to treat Sima Yao like he did Fu Jian. "Your Majesty, please excuse us!"

When they came out of Taichu Palace, Feng Qianjun leaned against the wall, laughing helplessly.

Chen Xing gritted his teeth. "Stop laughing!"

Feng Qianjun just shook his head. "I'm going to go tell Qing-er the good news."

As soon as Feng Qianjun left, things became awkward between Chen Xing and Xiang Shu. "Why is it," Chen Xing muttered, "that not one but *two* emperors like to entertain themselves with such senseless ideas? Our emperors are so unreliable, they're ridiculous… He meant that if I could kill Fu Jian, he would grant me the title of 'Ennobled Prince.'[8] Bestowing marriage is just an excuse, you don't need to… And in any case, you're no longer the Great Chanyu. When Han people get married, they do pay

particular attention to each family's social status, but it's just… Oh, what am I babbling about?!"

Xiang Shu's handsome face had turned slightly red. He turned his head away, wanting to change the subject, but Chen Xing beat him to it.

"Where's Xiao Shan?" Chen Xing asked. "Xiao Shan!"

Xiang Shu turned around and left. As Chen Xing looked at his back, he felt his heart leap for no reason at all. He wanted to call out to Xiang Shu, but he was distracted by Feng Qianjun returning.

"Tianchi," Feng Qianjun said, patting him on the shoulder, "I just remembered that tomorrow is the Autumn Deity Festival. Will you be busy?" Chen Xing looked at him. "If you're free tomorrow, I want to find you to, uh…have a private chat."

Chen Xing thought about it. "I'm not sure yet. If I do have free time tomorrow, I'll come see you at your house?"

"Okay," Feng Qianjun said cheerfully. "I'll wait for you until about one in the afternoon."

Chen Xing said goodbye to Feng Qianjun and quickly chased after Xiang Shu. "Where are you going?"

Xiang Shu plucked the begonia from his lapel and held it in his hand. His slender fingers fiddled with the flower's stem, causing several petals to come loose and flutter away in the air. "Don't you want to look for Xiao Shan? This way."

He led Chen Xing across the imperial garden and to the training field, where Chen Xing saw Xie Daoyun and Xiao Shan. Xie Daoyun had changed into clean martial garb and was holding a sword with both hands; she was practicing martial arts with Xiao Shan, who wore a pair of wooden

claws. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu watched from outside of the tight circle of imperial guards surrounding them.

Xie Daoyun waved her sword, but Xiao Shan knocked it away, remaining calm and composed. The imperial guards cheered loudly, but Xie Daoyun hadn't given up.

"Again!" she said angrily, picking up her long sword.

Xiao Shan was visibly losing his patience. "You can't beat me! Still want to try?"

With that haughty look of his, he looked just like a miniature Xiang Shu. *You both really need to be taken down a few pegs*, Chen Xing thought.

"Xiao Shan's martial arts are a mix of too many different styles," Xiang Shu observed offhandedly. "Everything's self-taught."

Chen Xing kept watching the sparring match. After a while, he said, "Xiang Shu, I've been wondering: How is it that you're so strong?"

"Some people are suited to reading and producing literary works," Xiang Shu replied in a rare serious tone, "while others are born with innate talent for martial arts. Is that so difficult to comprehend?"

Chen Xing often thought that Xiang Shu was too strong for a mortal being. Perhaps it was because of his excellent martial arts that he was so often irritable, or maybe it was because he was innately aggressive and bad-tempered that he could approach the pinnacle of martial arts.

Xiang Shu stepped forward. "I'll practice with you," he said in a clear tone.

Xiao Shan had his arms crossed, and when he saw Xiang Shu approaching, he instinctively backed away a few steps. Xiang Shu held the

begonia in his hand; he wasn't carrying any weapons. He faced Xiao Shan with one hand behind his body and the other hand holding the flower.

This caused a commotion among the onlookers. Chen Xing had heard of elite martial arts that used flying flowers or plucked leaves as weapons, but he'd never witnessed that kind of thing before. This begonia flower could fall apart with a single touch; how could someone use it in a fight? And if that weren't enough, the opponent was *Xiao Shan*.

"Chen-xiansheng," said a polite voice from behind Chen Xing. "Could I borrow a bit of your time for a conversation?"

Can't you wait until this fight is finished? Chen Xing thought, but when he turned around, he found that it was Pu Yang. Left with no other choice, he followed Pu Yang to the side of the training field.

Pu Yang took out a small wooden tile and handed it over to Chen Xing respectfully, with both hands. Chen Xing was surprised to recognize it as the waist token of the Great Han's Exorcism Department. "You… You're an exorcist too?"

"Not precisely. My ancestor was a bookkeeper for the Great Han's Exorcism Department."

Hundreds of years ago, when the Exorcism Department was at its peak, it had employed gatekeepers, errand runners, and bookkeepers. While the exorcists were off subduing yao in all sorts of places, these people stayed in the department to take care of things, much like civil servants in an army. How lucky to meet a descendant of someone from the Exorcism Department! Chen Xing saluted Pu Yang, and Pu Yang scrambled to return the salute.

“Who would have thought that I would meet a Great Exorcist hundreds of years later? Surely the era of the Silence of All Magic will be over soon.” Pu Yang sighed.

Chen Xing felt helpless. “I can’t say for sure. The Dinghai Pearl’s whereabouts are still very much unknown.”

“The Heart Lamp only reappears when demonic qi wreaks havoc in the Divine Land. Your presence here is evidence that a final confrontation is approaching. It’s almost time for mana to return to the world.”

Chen Xing’s shifu had often said the same thing. He, too, had had ancestors in the Exorcism Department. Even centuries on, there were many descendants of people with connections to the Exorcism Department in Jiangnan.

“You said your ancestor was an Exorcism Department bookkeeper?” Chen Xing asked again. “Do you have any information?”

“To be precise, my ancestor’s sect was a division of those who left the Exorcism Department to make a living after the Silence of All Magic. Because of his position in the department, my ancestor read a lot about natal charts and ancient texts regarding astrology and fates. After the Silence of All Magic, he made a living by divining people’s fates.”

Chen Xing knew that Pu Yang had most likely come to speak to him because of Sima Yao. “Regarding His Majesty’s natal chart… I saw the same result as you, Pu-xiansheng.”

“I wonder whether you, a Great Exorcist, might know of a way to alter someone’s fate?” Pu Yang said after a thoughtful silence. “That child, Sima Yao, I watched him grow up. I really can’t bear it.”

Chen Xing thought for a moment. His gaze kept drifting to Xiang Shu, dividing his attention. “Pu-daren,” he said at last, “the truth is, it’s impossible to alter. It’s decreed by fate. There’s really nothing I can do to help.”

Pu Yang seemed to have expected this answer; he didn’t look too crestfallen. He just sighed and said, “I will miss him.”

“To tell you the truth,” Chen Xing whispered, “I too once sought a means of altering the course of destiny. There are many things in this world that can be changed, but fate is set in stone. Otherwise, I would be the very first person to try to alter his fate.”

“Why is that?” Pu Yang asked, surprised.

It was a slip of the tongue, but Chen Xing had already said it, and he had no reason to hide it from Pu Yang in any case. “Like His Majesty, I don’t have much time left. Only a few more years… Anyway, you understand.”

Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan both abruptly stopped moving where they stood on the field. Xiao Shan’s ears perked up. He seemed a bit preoccupied, but Xiang Shu just held the begonia out in front of him and said, “Continue. Don’t get distracted.”

Xiao Shan swiftly recovered his composure. He shook his wooden claws and charged at Xiang Shu, who countered with the soft technique. The flower in Xiang Shu’s hand brushed against Xiao Shan in a feint, making him miss his mark—Xiao Shan pounced into an empty space and was instantly pulled off balance. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause.

Xiang Shu looked far to the side of the field, but Chen Xing had disappeared to who-knew-where, and the crowd was blocking his view. “Still want to fight?” he asked.

“I’ll win one day!” declared an irate Xiao Shan, pointing at Xiang Shu.

“I’m waiting,” Xiang Shu replied indifferently.

Chen Xing heard the cheers and applause and looked over to see that people were starting to disperse.

Pu Yang bowed. “If there’s anything you need help with, please let me know at any time.”

“I must trouble you to persuade His Majesty,” Chen Xing replied.

“We’re family; it’s no trouble. I’ll spare no effort to convince him. Oh, yes, and tomorrow is the Autumn Deity Festival—I wonder if you have any plans?”

“Uh… Why?”

“His Majesty wishes to have a private chat with you. If you have no other plans, you can accompany him and Her Majesty to Mount Zhong to offer a sacrifice to the gods. But it’s not a must; we’ll wait for you in the palace until one in the afternoon. After that, the royal carriage will set off.”

Chen Xing nodded. “Okay. If I’m free, I’ll be there before one.”

After Pu Yang left, Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan came back. “Chen Xing,” said Xiao Shan, “free tomorrow?”

Why does everyone have an invitation for me? “You want to go to the Autumn Deity Festival too?” he guessed.

“Take me?”

Chen Xing hesitated. “That… I’ll see? If I haven’t arrived by one hour after midday, you don’t have to wait for me.”

Xiao Shan looked unsatisfied with this, but after losing to Xiang Shu, he didn’t feel confident enough to insist, so he just nodded his head.

By the time they returned to the Xie residence, Xie An was home too. During dinner, Chen Xing shot the occasional glance at Xiang Shu, who had seemed a bit absent-minded since they’d returned to the palace. Everyone else had invited Chen Xing out to the festival, but Xiang Shu hadn’t said anything about it, nor had he made any suggestions about celebrating the festival together with Chen Xing.

“Tomorrow is the seventeenth of the eighth lunar month,” Xie An said to Chen Xing.

“Uh-huh, seventeenth of the eighth lunar month,” Chen Xing echoed. *Wait. Isn’t the seventeenth of the eighth lunar month my birthday? This year’s Autumn Deity Festival is very timely.* He looked over at Xiang Shu. “You don’t have anything you want to say?”

The look Xiang Shu gave Chen Xing in return was inscrutable.

“How was the audience with His Majesty today?” asked Xie An.

Chen Xing picked out some essential points and told Xie An about them. Xiang Shu, who already knew all about it, half-listened for a while before he lost his patience and said, “I’m leaving.”

Xie An sighed. “Regarding the matter of accompanying a delegation to Luoyang, I’ll think of a better option and let you know about it after the Autumn Deity Festival, so don’t rush to set out on your journey.” Chen Xing made an affirmative sound. Xie An stretched his body and added,

“Tomorrow is the Autumn Deity Festival, Xiaoshidi. Did you make plans already?”

“Huh?”

“If you have some free time, maybe we can talk alone? I want to take you somewhere.”

“Can’t you all just get together and make one appointment?” Chen Xing griped. “Why does everyone insist on the Autumn Deity Festival anyway?”

“Oh?” Xie An laughed. “Who else asked you? I was just asking. If you don’t come, then after the sacrifice to the gods in the afternoon, I’ll return home with my wife.”

“If I’m coming,” Chen Xing said, resigned, “I’ll look for you by one in the afternoon.”

Xie An nodded cheerfully, and Chen Xing returned to his room. He saw that Sima Yao had sent people to bring him new clothes and several precious tools, presumably as thank-you gifts for solving the problem in Kuaiji. Exhausted, Chen Xing lay down to sleep, but he found his mind racing with thoughts of everything Xiang Shu had done during the day.

Chen Xing clutched the quilt, feeling morose. He wanted to get up and have a conversation with Xiang Shu—but about what? They spoke every single day, and their interactions were always so bland and dull.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!” Chen Xing shouted. “I’M GOING CRAZY!”

Of late, he kept finding his thoughts drifting back to that first encounter with Xiang Shu. From Chang’an to Chi Le Chuan, and finally to Jiangnan, Chen Xing had become more and more aware of the

indescribable feeling he had for Xiang Shu, and of the reason for his constant, irrepressible urge to annoy him. Xiang Shu seemed, for the most part, averse to having a proper conversation with him; it was only during their quarrels that Chen Xing really felt like Xiang Shu cared about him.

Chen Xing sat up, still clutching the quilt. *I like him,* he thought, and even his internal monologue was jittery. *What should I do? I have to control myself.*

He told himself to forget about it. After tomorrow, he had exactly two years left to live. What else could he do?

And Xiang Shu doesn't care about you either! he reminded himself. *Don't expect your affections to be reciprocated!*

When he woke the next day, the sun had already risen as high as three poles. Chen Xing changed into his new clothes in front of the mirror. The outfit was in the "Flower Gown Fluttering Tail" style that was so popular in Jiangnan. Chen Xing looked at himself in the mirror carefully and thought, *I look refined and elegant too, right?*

As he was about to head out, he remembered his problem. Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, Sima Yao, and Xie An had all invited him out at the same time. And then there was Xiang Shu—Chen Xing didn't even know what his plans were. But the Autumn Deity Festival had arrived, and the world outside was cheery and fragrant with flowers.

Who should I spend the festival with today? Chen Xing wasn't certain. What he wanted was to go seek out Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu hadn't said anything to him yesterday about the festival.

Chen Xing mulled it over at length, waging an epic war over it in his heart. He didn't really want to talk to Xiang Shu…but he found himself walking in the direction of his room anyway.

Chapter 66

WHEN CHEN XING stuck his head in, he saw that Xiang Shu had just finished changing his clothes. He asked, “What are you doing?”

Xiang Shu was wearing a pair of flat leather clogs. The leather was cowhide, and only a thin layer at that; it made the shoes look fragile, and just like wooden clogs, each shoe had two strands of rope to hold it in place. Xiang Shu was also wearing a martial robe with two layers, lined and unlined, and martial trousers that reached his ankles. The leather clogs made him look like he was going barefoot. He looked suave and handsome.

“Going out,” Xiang Shu said, “and relaxing.”

“Alone?”

“Got a problem with that?”

“I want to go with you,” Chen Xing said boldly.

“So many people have invited you out today. Why don’t you go and meet with the emperor?”

How did you even know that Sima Yao asked to see me? Chen Xing thought. Aloud, he replied, “Not happening.”

“How about Feng Qianjun? Xiao Shan?”

“Why are you suddenly so wordy? If you keep going on like that, I’ll leave.”

“Then go.” Xiang Shu had no sword on his back today; he was empty-handed. He fixed his cuffs and then turned around and left the room. Chen Xing followed him at a distance that was neither too close nor too far.

Xiang Shu walked very slowly, a contrast to the usual long strides that left Chen Xing chasing after him, out of breath. They went out onto Wuyi Lane.

Golden paper cut into the shapes of little people and little horses hung over the door of every household, and strips of red cloth were tied among the maple trees. It was a clear autumn day in Jiankang, with maple leaves fluttering through the air and children out flying kites. Everyone who stepped outside felt happy and relaxed.

Each house also had a table out front with an arrangement of sticky rice in all colors, a variety of deep-fried foods, and a selection of flower pastries. Passersby were free to eat what they pleased.

Xiang Shu stopped mid-stroll and turned to Chen Xing. “Is this meant to be eaten by people, or is it all for the gods?”

Chen Xing caught up to him; now that Xiang Shu was finally willing to have a conversation with Chen Xing, they could walk side by side. “It’s already been offered to the gods. After it’s been used as offerings, they’re set out for people to eat. Do you want to try some? I’ll get you something.”

“No. I don’t eat sweets.”

Chen Xing, however, did, and he gave a pastry to Xiang Shu. This time of year, osmanthus flowers were in full bloom, and the sweet osmanthus cake was delicate and translucent.

Xiang Shu frowned. “Children’s food.” But then, turning his head away to avoid Chen Xing’s gaze, he ate the cake in one bite.

“Where do you want to go?” Chen Xing asked.

“Nowhere in particular,” Xiang Shu replied easily. “I just want to stroll around. It’s getting close to evening now. Why haven’t you gone back yet?”

Chen Xing mimicked the way Xiang Shu had spoken to him earlier. “I want to celebrate the festival with you. Got a problem with that?”

Xiang Shu blinked.

They arrived at the market to find it a hotbed of noise and excitement, comparable to the Autumn Close Festival in Chi Le Chuan. Jiankang scholars and common people alike were out and perusing the goods. Kite-sellers hawked their wares, and people scrounged through makeup stalls. Curious, Chen Xing went straight to the vendor selling sweets. Xiang Shu trailed after him and watched from the side with an impassive look on his face.

Next to the sweets vendor were shops selling porcelain cups, salvaged goods from both the north and the south, all kinds of dried goods, wooden boxes, and little carvings. Chen Xing looked each stall over one by one before moving on to the vendor selling paintings.

“Do you want to buy anything?” he asked Xiang Shu, who was still hovering behind him.

Xiang Shu had thought Chen Xing was about to buy something and was preparing to fish his money pouch out of his pocket. “No,” he replied, watching as Chen Xing intently studied a wine bottle that he had picked up.

“Do want to try this wine?”

Xiang Shu was adamant. “No. I don’t want to drink.”

Chen Xing sized Xiang Shu up. Xiang Shu was as silent as ever, which made window shopping an awkward, stilted task. *How can you be so bored?* Chen Xing thought. The Autumn Deity Festival was so interesting! Who could be bored amid the hustle and bustle of these maple leaf markets?

“What do you think of Jiangnan?” Chen Xing asked.

“Boring.”

“But you still came?”

“Weren’t you the one who wanted to come?”

Chen Xing had no good answer for that. He knew what Xiang Shu was really thinking: that Jiankang was an interesting place. He took a rattle drum from a roadside vendor and rattled it a few times in Xiang Shu’s face, then put it back, thinking, *You just don’t want to show how amazed and fascinated you are because you don’t want me getting a big head and saying that Jiankang is better than Chi Le Chuan.* When he saw the rattle drum, Xiang Shu frowned slightly, and Chen Xing knew he had been reminded of the Zheng Drum.

Suddenly, Chen Xing said, “You know, I heard you calling me Xing-er that night.”

“When?” Xiang Shu asked mildly.

“That night in Kuaiji.” Thinking about Wu Qi and that exorcist couple made Chen Xing feel tense again, and Xiang Shu noticed the frustrated look on his face.

“I didn’t call you that.”

“I heard you. Why were you calling me by such a childish nickname, though? Only my parents and my shifu ever called me that. Not even Yuwen Xin called me Xing-er back in the day.”

“Oh? That was what your shifu usually called you? I didn’t know.”

“Don’t play dumb.” Chen Xing sighed. “Oh? What’s that?”

Following Chen Xing's gaze, Xiang Shu saw a number of young men and women holding hands as they walked along the street, each wearing a red string around their wrist decorated with pieces of shell. The shells varied in shape and size, but they all came in matching pairs.

"Where did the thing on your wrist come from?" Xiang Shu asked a girl passing by.

She smiled at him. "Someone gave it to me."

Chen Xing was puzzled. Everyone seemed to be wearing them. Was it to ward off evil spirits? Looking around some more, he spotted two handsome young men with red strings on their joined hands. They were looking at inkstones, and like all the others, the red strings around their wrists had shells dangling off them.

"Were those gifts too?" Chen Xing mused aloud. "They look very pretty."

Xiang Shu approached the young men. "Where did you get the shells?"

The two men turned and looked at Xiang Shu and Chen Xing. One of the men turned out to be Xie Shi. "Oh!" He smiled at them. "Fancy running into you two here."

"It's a gift from someone," the other young man explained, lifting up his hand and showing the string to Chen Xing.

"Very pretty. Why are people wearing it today?" Chen Xing asked.

Xie Shi smiled again, and his face flushed red. "You have to have it given to you." He tugged the other young man along, and they turned and walked away. Xie Shi waved as they left.

Now Chen Xing was even more confused. Xiang Shu just shrugged. Their questions had gotten them no answers.

Chen Xing crossed through the market to the other side, where the banks of the Huai River were covered with maple leaves. Boatmen rowed their boats along the river for young men and women to sit in. Many people had bought food and were sitting by the bridge to eat, seemingly waiting for something. In the distance, where a stage had been set up by the river, actors began a performance. It was an opera, *The Bearer of the Gilded Mace*, which told the story of Lu Xiu and Yin Lihua, childhood sweethearts separated by their disparate stations in life.

Chen Xing smiled. “If I were an official, I’d want to be a bearer of the gilded mace. If I were to marry, I’d want to marry Yin Lihua…”

Xiang Shu stood at the riverside, in a section with fewer people, and watched the opera play out on the distant stage through a screen of falling maple leaves. Chen Xing explained the story of Lu Xiu and Yin Lihua to Xiang Shu, and they both sat down by the river to listen to the songs. As he spoke, Chen Xing noticed that Xiang Shu’s mind seemed to be elsewhere, and he wondered if maybe Xiang Shu wasn’t very interested in things like operas. He always told Xiang Shu things with so much enthusiasm, but most of the time, Xiang Shu didn’t pay him any attention. He just listened to Chen Xing out of politeness. Chen Xing gave up and dropped it.

“Why did you stop talking?” Xiang Shu asked, baffled.

“I forget the rest,” Chen Xing said, disinterested. He changed the subject. “Do you think that Murong Chong—”

A look of great frustration came over Xiang Shu. “Can we talk about something other than exorcism for once? I came to the festival today

because I wanted to relax."

"All right, fine."

"Do you have nothing else in your head?"

"Nothing," Chen Xing admitted. "So actually, I'm the boring one around here." They were both silent for a while, then Chen Xing gave in and chuckled. "Is there anything to eat? We should've brought some food with us today."

Xiang Shu got up and left without saying another word. Chen Xing assumed that he was going to buy them some hot food, so he didn't follow him. After a moment, he noticed that a five-stringed qin was lying with its dust cover under a nearby maple tree. The owner had gone off somewhere, perhaps to watch the show. The qin was just lying around, so Chen Xing picked it up and set it on his knees. He plucked a string to test the sound and found that it was an excellent guqin, near priceless in its quality. The owner must have been rich, to have left a guqin that cost at least a few hundred taels of silver lying on the ground like that. Chen Xing plucked at the strings, producing a stream of notes that flowed from beneath his fingers in a smooth, practiced manner.

Having purchased some lotus leaf steamed buns and warm wine at a restaurant, Xiang Shu was returning to the bridge by the river when he heard a familiar tune. It was the one he had played with his Qiang flute on the city towers of Karakorum, when he bid farewell to the people of the Ancient Chi Le Covenant—the Fusheng Melody. The guqin's sound stuttered to a stop a few times, as if the player couldn't remember the tonal shift and the melody clearly, and after several changes to the starting key,

the tune became much gentler than it had been with the sonorous Qiang flute.

Xiang Shu was speechless. From his vantage point on the bridge, he saw Chen Xing sitting on the riverbank in the distance with a guqin on his lap. Maple leaves fluttered down around him as his fingers plucked intently at the guqin. The entire scene looked like something out of a painting.

After a while, the Fusheng Melody ended. As Xiang Shu left the bridge, he heard the beginnings of a tune he'd never heard before coming from the maple forest by the river. At its outset, the tune was full of solitude and loneliness, its notes few and far between. But then the strings rang out in quick bursts of sound, one after the other, like bursts of silver pearls flying through the air, or like heavy hammers hitting the ground.

The tune sped up even more. A gust of wind sent maple leaves swirling into the air; along with the guqin's melody, they created a new painting, one of misty waters extending into the distance, vast and boundless mountain ranges, migratory birds flying south and eventually returning north. The guqin's sound was gentle, but the song itself contained within it the majesty of the vast natural world.

Xiang Shu stopped for a moment, entranced. When Chen Xing realized that Xiang Shu was standing behind him, he stopped playing the qin and turned around. "Did you buy anything? I'm starving to death."

"What song was that?" Xiang Shu asked.

"'Come Away Home.' It's a piece by Dao Qian—I don't know if he's here in attendance today. What have you bought? Didn't you say you aren't drinking?"

“You shouldn’t drink too much,” Xiang Shu replied. “You’re a lightweight.”

It was then that the owner of the qin returned. It turned out that the qin’s owner was none other than Wang Xizhi, who had come with his entire family in tow. Both groups made pleasant small talk for a while, but Xiang Shu’s face had that familiar impatient look to it, so after they finished eating, Chen Xing dragged him away.

“You like that melody?” Xiang Shu asked abruptly.

“It’s very pleasant to listen to,” Chen Xing said, “but only when you play it on your Qiang flute. How did you learn to play the flute? I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“My father taught me. I’ll teach you when I have time. Do you know how to play the zither as well?” Xiang Shu was a little surprised that Chen Xing could actually play the qin, and he assumed his surprise was similar to what Chen Xing had felt when he learned that Xiang Shu could play the Qiang flute. It was as if their knowledge of each other had previously been limited to only their roles as exorcist and protector.

“My zither skills aren’t very good in comparison,” Chen Xing said with a smile. “I was too mischievous back then. I didn’t spend much time studying it.”

They crossed the bridge, and Chen Xing asked, “Want to fly a kite?”

“If you want to fly one, I’ll come along,” Xiang Shu said.

Chen Xing’s enthusiasm drained out of him again. “Forget it.” Xiang Shu glanced around for a kite, but Chen Xing stopped him from buying one.

Another, bigger market was situated along the north bank of the Huai River. Unlike the one outside Wuyi Lane, which sold necessities for aristocratic families, this larger market was designed for the common people. Xiang Shu stopped and looked at the buildings that populated the street by the river, noticing that they were all wine shops and storefronts.

“Wait, isn’t that the street that Dongzhe Bank gave to you?” Chen Xing asked, remembering.

“Yes,” Xiang Shu replied. “It’s all mine now.” For the first time, Chen Xing realized that Xiang Shu was now a rich Jiankang landowner.

“What do you want to do?”

“Nothing. I actually came here today just to take a look at how the businesses are doing after being rebuilt. The rest can wait for later.”

“Later?” Chen Xing asked, starting to smile. “You want to live here?”

Xiang Shu looked at Chen Xing but said nothing. Chen Xing thought about adding *Who’s the one who said that Jiangnan was boring a moment ago?* but he stopped himself. Xiang Shu was half Han, and they’d learned about his family’s origins in Kuaiji; Jiangnan was his home too. Why couldn’t he live there?

“Can I come over to your house as a guest sometime?” Chen Xing asked instead.

“If you’d like,” Xiang Shu replied.

When the two of them crossed the main street, they saw a large number of peddlers along the roadside, lifting bamboo poles above their heads. Matching shell bracelets just like the ones Chen Xing had seen earlier hung on the poles.

“Ah, those!” Chen Xing exclaimed. “How much for one? Why is everyone wearing them?”

“They come in pairs,” the peddler told him earnestly. “They’re to be given to your girl or your lover.”

Chen Xing blinked. No wonder everyone had said it was a gift!

He already had one string in his hand, and he couldn’t just give it back. But if he did buy it, who would he give the other one to? And he didn’t have any money with him, besides.

The peddler added, “This is a moon shell, which can only be found along the seashore on the night of the full moon. Are you two gentlemen from the north? During the Deity Festivals, we buy these and give them to our beloveds as a way to indicate that we are together.”

“Oh, okay.” Chen Xing thought for a moment, still holding that red string. He snuck a glance at Xiang Shu.

Xiang Shu shrugged and gave the peddler a few pieces of silver. The peddler wanted to give him back his change, but Xiang Shu said, “Keep it. I’ll take two strings.”

Suddenly, Chen Xing's heart was pounding, and he clutched the string in his hand. It just so happened to be paired with the one Xiang Shu was purchasing!

"Many thanks, sirs," the peddler said, in high spirits, as he took the money. "May your relationship last for a long time."

Is he going to give it to me? Chen Xing thought, his head spinning. Happiness truly did sneak up on a person! But when he looked up again, he saw that Xiang Shu had walked on ahead and was glancing back at him, confused as to why Chen Xing wasn't moving.

Chen Xing looked at the red bracelet in his hand. After a brief moment of confusion, he trailed after Xiang Shu, still clutching it. Xiang Shu stuffed the bracelet, red string and all, into the chest of his robe, confusing Chen Xing even further. They made their way back to the bridge, but Xiang Shu never gave the shell bracelet to him, and after a while, Chen Xing put his bracelet away too.

"You're not going to wear it?" Xiang Shu asked.

"Forget it," Chen Xing said with a smile. A little while later, when they were standing on the bridge, watching the water flow beneath, he asked, "Xiang Shu, who do you want to give that to?"

Xiang Shu didn't respond.

"Why don't you hold on to it for now?" Chen Xing suggested. "You can give it to the person you like in the future."

Xiang Shu's only response was an absent "Mm." Down below, maple leaves flowed along the surface of the river, following the rushing waters.

"What sort of person do you want to be with in the future?" asked Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu didn’t answer; he just looked up and studied the color of the sky. “It’s getting dark,” he said. “Shall we go back?”

If Xiang Shu wanted to avoid a subject, Chen Xing knew that nothing could make him talk. If Chen Xing kept asking him questions, it would only make things unpleasant.

Suddenly, Chen Xing noticed something. “Wait, what’s going on over on that side?” As the sky darkened, people were flocking to the river, and dozens of water lanterns were floating on the water. “I’m going to take a look at what they’re doing. We can head back right afterward.”

Xiang Shu followed Chen Xing off the bridge. As night fell, the markets began to close for the day, and the people of Jiankang came to the bank of the Huai River. Many new stalls had opened up there, and they were selling paper lanterns. Chen Xing asked around and learned that, since the Yongjia Rebellion, there was an unwritten tradition of placing a water lantern on the Huai River to mourn one’s relatives on the night of the Autumn Deity Festival.

“I’ll buy one too,” Chen Xing said, “because so many people have died because of me.”

“Then you’ll have to buy every water lantern at every stall.”

Chen Xing sighed. “That’s true.”

Xiang Shu had only said that to make fun of Chen Xing; he hadn’t expected Chen Xing to agree. “Even now, you still blame yourself?”

“I know,” Chen Xing said, smiling, “but I just can’t bring myself to let it go.”

There was nothing for it. Xiang Shu bought all the paper lanterns at that stall, then borrowed a candle and lit it from the flame of someone else's. Down by the shore, he lit each lantern, and, one by one, Chen Xing set them down into the water. This one was for the coachman and the people of Chang'an. This was for the Akele king and his consort. This one was for all the Xiongnu who'd died at Che Luofeng's hands. This lantern was for the Hu people of Chi Le Chuan…and this one was for Wu Qi and Zheng Lun of Kuaiji.

"Do you want to light one for Che Luofeng?" asked Chen Xing.

"Let's light one for your family first," Xiang Shu replied.

Chen Xing took the lantern and bent over, setting it adrift on the river's surface. When he looked up, he spotted Feng Qianjun and Gu Qing standing not far away, bending down to set a lantern of their own on the water.

Xiang Shu whistled into the distance, and they found that Xiao Shan was there too. He was sitting on a boat with Xie Daoyun and another man rowing that boat under the bridge. Xiao Shan knelt on the bow and set down a lantern, which they assumed was for Lu Ying.

"They're over there." Chen Xing motioned for Xiang Shu to look. Xiang Shu made an affirmative noise, and he moved behind Chen Xing to set the last lantern, the one in his hands, down onto the river.

That was when Chen Xing caught sight of someone else waving at them from the other side of the bank. At first, he didn't recognize them, but when they put the lantern close to their face, he realized that it was Bi Hun! What a surprise to see him in Jiankang too.

Chen Xing waved back, then said to Xiang Shu, "Remember him?"

“I remember,” Xiang Shu replied mildly. “The military officer who guards Kuaiji. His lover is dead.”

Chen Xing became earnest. “Xiang Shu, I know you think I live as if I have no self-preservation instinct. You keep telling me not to use the Heart Lamp because you’re afraid that I’ll die. I always tell you that I have no choice, that I can only accept what the heavens have arranged for me. Perhaps you resent it. But…oh, don’t you see? At moments like this…”

Bi Hun set down his water lantern, and Chen Xing raised his hands. The Heart Lamp shone forth brilliantly from his upturned palms. For a moment, everyone along both sides of the river turned to look at him. Chen Xing gazed solemnly back at them, the people of the Divine Land, who brimmed with happiness and anger, sorrow and joy. He was no different from any of them.

He slowly lifted his right hand and splayed it out in front of himself. With a simple one-handed gesture, he performed a magic trick for them all, his hand forming the “lamp spell” he had learned as a child. The spell called upon the lamp to shine gloriously across the world, dispelling the darkness and illuminating everything in sight. He wanted to show them that in the dark of night, he would never stop giving them the strength to pursue what they believed in.

His hair drifted in the night wind, and the dazzling radiance illuminated his face. Both of his eyes were closed. “No matter what I’m doing this for,” he said, smiling, “and no matter what it will cost me…I think, when I see them, that I’m wholly willing to do it.”

Xiao Shan, Feng Qianjun, Gu Qing, Xie Daoyun, Bi Hun… All their friends, and the thousands of other people on both sides of the river, gazed

at the glimmering Heart Lamp as if they understood the significance of the message Chen Xing was trying to convey. One after another, they followed Chen Xing's lead and copied his "lamp spell" gesture.

Xiang Shu was still for a moment. Then he turned to face Chen Xing with the rest of them. His right hand "ignited" the lamp, and his eyes reflected the image of Chen Xing bathed in that pure, shining light.

Horseshoes clattered across cobbles. Xie An chivvied his horse across the Huai River Bridge and went down the bank to meet them. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu left the riverside, and Bi Hun came over to join them, but before they could start chatting, Xie An reined his horse to a stop right next to them.

"I've finally found you," he said. "I have news, Xiaoshidi, but I don't know whether it's good news or bad." A wave of trepidation washed over Chen Xing. "I've just been informed that three days ago, Murong Chong and Wang Ziye clashed in Chang'an. Wang Ziye is dead."

Chapter 67

THREE DAYS prior, in Jianzhang Palace, Chang'an.

Tuoba Yan had moved to the imperial palace to recuperate. His entire left arm was black with decay from the wound he'd received a year prior. He sat in the resting hall, dazed, his upper body bare.

Murong Chong walked into the palace and scrutinized Tuoba Yan, frowning. Tuoba Yan glanced up at him. They said nothing. Tuoba Yan was getting thinner by the day; his eyes were slightly sunken, and his face was dark and gloomy. He looked nothing like the person he had once been. Sitting off to one side, Wang Ziye was preparing an ointment for Tuoba Yan.

Wang Ziye finished the ointment and applied it. "I'm done," he said, and he had the imperial doctor bandage Tuoba Yan back up. "Rest for a while more."

Tuoba Yan seemed listless. Before he could greet Murong Chong properly, he was interrupted by Fu Jian walking into the hall.

"One year ago," Fu Jian explained to Murong Chong, "during the drought fiend havoc in Chang'an, Yan-er was injured by a demon. Fortunately, Ziye's special medicine has controlled the poison."

Murong Chong looked at Tuoba Yan for a long time. "How much longer will you live for?" he asked finally, cold and callous. Tuoba Yan laughed a bitter, helpless laugh.

"Murong-daren exaggerates," said Wang Ziye. "If he rests properly, he should recover. The trouble is that when the injury occurred, Tuoba-

daren left for the north without telling anyone he had been injured, which delayed his diagnosis and treatment."

"Wang Ziye, how is it that you know how to treat this kind of injury?" Murong Chong asked.

"A person who lives a long life and reads many books comes to know a little about everything," Wang Ziye replied levelly.

Murong Chong didn't reply, so Wang Ziye got up and took his leave, leaving Fu Jian, Tuoba Yan, and Murong Chong sitting in the hall. Murong Chong had never been the talkative type; he didn't even bother making conversation with Fu Jian, let alone someone from the Tuoba family. But seeing Tuoba Yan, who had once been so graceful and talented, in such a state sent a chill down his spine. He felt Tuoba Yan was similar to himself —it was a bit too close to home.

Tuoba Yan had been ill for quite some time. At first, Murong Chong had heard that he was hurt while practicing his martial arts. He'd never suspected the truth: that Tuoba Yan had been infected by corpse poison. Even more surprising was that Wang Ziye had managed to control the spread of the poison with some sort of medicine, keeping Tuoba Yan from turning into a living corpse. Still, Tuoba Yan had been forced to temporarily resign from his position as commander of the imperial guard so that he could "recuperate." As a result, the imperial guard was currently under Fu Jian's direct command.

Murong Chong sat quietly to one side while Fu Jian comforted Tuoba Yan with some kind words. "How's the situation in Chi Le Chuan?" asked Tuoba Yan.

“Shulü Kong resigned as the Great Chanyu,” Fu Jian told him. “We have already dispatched three groups of couriers to find Shi Mokun. The plan to conquer the south must proceed. It all depends now on whether the other Hu tribes know what’s good for them.”

“I heard Shulü Kong and that Han boy sailed down to Jiangnan from Goguryeo.”

Fu Jian made an affirmative sound. “It’s a pity. Shulü Kong was quite a talent, but he left Chi Le Chuan behind for some reason… But never mind all that. We’ll talk about it another day.”

Tuoba Yan remained silent.

“Rest up first. If there’s anything you need, send someone to pass me a message,” said Murong Chong, and Tuoba Yan nodded.

“What else is there that he’d want in Our palace?” Fu Jian asked with a smile.

When it came to Tuoba Yan, Murong Chong was conflicted. On the one hand, Tuoba Yan had infuriated him by unhesitatingly standing up for Xiang Shu and Chen Xing when they were heading north. On the other hand, Tuoba Yan had gotten along well with Murong Chong’s older sister, Princess Qinghe, and he was a fellow Xianbei. Out of respect for his sister’s memory, Murong Chong regarded Tuoba Yan as a comrade, despite his reluctance to openly acknowledge it.

He also found Tuoba Yan pitiable—Murong Chong understood the loneliness in his eyes with just a glance. When Fu Jian had brought him deep into the palace, he had fallen into a trance. He’d had no friends or family to speak to back then, and he only saw the eunuchs and maids who came to deliver food. He’d been no different than a prisoner.

“Let Yan-er rest,” Fu Jian said. “Follow Us, Chong-er.”

Murong Chong followed Fu Jian out. They passed by the Taiye Pond, which was on one side of Shanglin Garden. Fu Jian planted his hands on the long railing and looked down at the fish swimming in the pond.

“We are often left thinking these days,” Fu Jian said.

“I remember Wang Meng advising you not to wage war more than once before he died,” said Murong Chong. “Hasn’t he appeared in your dreams?”

Fu Jian smiled helplessly. “It has nothing to do with the southern expedition. Chong-er, can’t you let Us finish before you interrupt?”

Murong Chong’s gaze shifted to the pool. “What are you thinking about?”

Fu Jian turned around, leaning against the railing. As he stared at Murong Chong, he said, “About life and death, and about when We will die.”

Murong Chong glanced at him, taken aback. For as long as he could remember, Fu Jian had never talked about this. He had never even said things like “After Our time has passed thousands of autumns in the future…” before, so no one thought that Fu Jian would die in the near future. This was the northern monarch, who claimed his achievements were “unparalleled” and who was in the prime of his life. Many people cursed him in secret by saying he’d die one day, but in truth, Fu Jian only become more potent; he got stronger day by day. He was on track to become even more invincible than Shulü Kong, who was known as the “First Under Heaven.”

Murong Chong’s expression flickered for just a brief moment before he put his thoughts away. “Why did Your Majesty say that?” he asked.

The gaze Fu Jian turned on Murong Chong was all tenderness. He reached for Murong Chong’s hand, but Murong Chong avoided him instinctively. He had been away from Chang’an for too long, so long that he had started to forget the past—but with Fu Jian in front of him, everything that had happened before became real again. After so much time in Luoyang, it was difficult for him to return to the role he had been playing in Chang’an.

In the end, he allowed Fu Jian to hold his hand.

“Life, aging, and death are all predestined by the heavens,” Fu Jian said. “All people will eventually die. We have been thinking a lot since your sister left Us. We thought of Wang Meng, We thought of Shulü Wen, and We also thought of all the people who conquered the north with Us.” Murong Chong didn’t say anything, and Fu Jian continued, “When We saw Yan-er and then the drought fiends, We couldn’t help but wonder what exactly the drought fiends were.”

Suddenly wary, Murong Chong frowned. He remained silent as Fu Jian rubbed his palm with his larger hand and intertwined Murong Chong’s fingers with his own.

“After that chaotic fight against the drought fiends,” Fu Jian continued, “Ziye read many ancient texts and told Us that the drought fiends did not appear out of thin air. Their origins date back to a long time ago.”

“What?” Something was wrong. Murong Chong turned his head to look Fu Jian in the eye, and Fu Jian gazed back and nodded.

“Yes. Like birds and beasts, like stones and trees, they are part of this world. The so-called ‘drought fiends’ are, in essence, a twisted irony of human suffering, a mockery of the will of heaven—a defiant rebellion against the inevitability of death.”

“And?” Murong Chong frowned. “Your Majesty, what are you trying to say?”

“Didn’t you often ask who sent you that army in the Longmen Gorge camp?”

Murong Chong stayed quiet.

Fu Jian pulled him along by the hand and circled the water corridor of the Taiye Pond. They walked in silence the whole way and stopped outside Hanguang Hall.

“I brought Chong-er,” Fu Jian said in a resonant voice.

Standing outside Hanguang Hall, Murong Chong realized abruptly that his palm was drenched in cold sweat. Fu Jian, heedless of his anxiety, gently pushed the door. It opened to reveal someone sitting inside prim and proper. They were turned to the side and holding a mirror in their hand.

It was Princess Qinghe.

Murong Chong’s breath halted when he saw her beautiful face. At first glance, it looked no different from when she was alive; upon closer scrutiny, he saw that her pale face and neck were covered with rouge, and her eyes were cloudy and lifeless. Still, the moment she looked up, she smiled just like she used to.

“Chong-er?” Princess Qinghe said quietly.

Murong Chong’s voice trembled. “Jie?”

“Ziye acquired records relating to the drought fiends from the Feng family,” Fu Jian explained. “The dead can be brought back to life, as long as we handle the process properly. We also found out that Feng Qianyi took the wrong path…”

Murong Chong’s forehead was clammy. He stared at Princess Qinghe with wide-open eyes, and his blood ran cold, as if someone was strangling his throat.

That night, after the evening drums finished beating, a carriage left the west side of the city and drove east. Its wheels splashed up water from the road, and the horses’ feet slid and skidded on the slippery ground underfoot. In the dark, oil was quietly dripping down from the courtyard walls on both sides of the street. It converged toward the center of the street until the entire road was soaked in oil.

“Wait,” said Wang Ziye, who was inside the carriage. “Stop.”

Soldiers clad in full black armor loomed on all sides of the street, silent and imposing. They looked like monsters who had been keeping watch for a long time.

“I thought you were here to thank me,” Wang Ziye remarked. In an instant, every guard, from the center of the street going outward, nocked an arrow onto their crossbow with a chorus of simultaneous clicks. Tens of thousands of soldiers, previously lying in ambush inside Chang’an, surged forth.

From the shadows, Murong Chong emerged. “What should I thank you for?” he asked, frosty. “Situating hundreds of thousands of living corpses in Luoyang? Manipulating Feng Qianyi, which led to my sister’s death? Stealing her corpse to turn her into what she is today?”

Wang Ziye waved the fan in his hand, his smile carefree. “Murong Chong, you’re still so young. I’m a person who can awaken the dead. How likely are you to win in a fight against me?”

Murong Chong sized Wang Ziye up. A soldier behind him silently passed him a torch. “I don’t know what you are,” he said in a low voice. “But I know without a doubt that you’re not human, Wang Ziye.”

Wang Ziye smiled wordlessly, staring at the torch in Murong Chong’s hand.

“I don’t have much to say to you,” Murong Chong said, “and I’m not the least bit interested in knowing what you are. I just want to send you back to where you belong. Leave. You shouldn’t have come to Chang’an.”

The torch fell to the ground.

In the afternoon, in Jiankang:

“…So Murong Chong set fire to all of Shufang Street,” Xie An said. “Wang Ziye was burned to ashes in the fire, along with an unknown number of innocent people.”

Sima Yao was sitting in the middle with Pu Yang. Seated to his left were Xie Xuan; the Governor of Yanzhou; Xie Shi, the Assistant Minister of Huangmen; Wang Linzhi, the Prefect of Dongyang; Huan Yi, the Military General of the Household; and several others. Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, and Feng Qianjun were to his right.

Xie An, for his part, sat in front of a short table in the center, holding a folding fan. He spoke at a moderate pace as he explained the startling news that he and Sima Yao had received. When he was done, he took a sip of tea to moisten his throat.

“Apparently Fu Jian was furious the following day,” Sima Yao said indifferently. “And not only did he refuse to delay the southern expedition, he even claimed he’d fulfill Wang Ziye’s dying wish to utterly annihilate our Great Jin. Ironically, of all the people under their so-called empire, it was Han people from all levels of society who most fervently demanded an investigation of Wang Ziye’s death. That’s interesting in and of itself.”

Chen Xing was silent, still recovering from his shock—the day of the Autumn Deity Festival was really quite the time to hear such earth-shattering news.

“Murong Chong got rid of him with fire alone?” asked Xiang Shu.

“As far as anyone has been able to tell, yes,” Xie An replied. “I’m still not capable enough to become an exorcist, but over the past few days, I’ve heard Xiaoshidi talk a lot about the principles of how the heavens birthed all living creatures. It doesn’t seem that Murong Chong had any magical artifacts in his hands, nor was he accompanied by any experts in magic. Armed with his indignation alone, he burned Wang Ziye to death. As for the source of the enmity between the two of them, it remains unknown.”

“Princess Qinghe,” Chen Xing muttered. “It must be because of Princess Qinghe.”

Xiang Shu frowned slightly.

“So he discovered that Wang Ziye was the one behind everything?” said Feng Qianjun.

“No. I’m guessing he found out that Wang Ziye resurrected Princess Qinghe,” Chen Xing said, to everyone’s shock. “Feng-dage, do you still remember what you heard when you were following the Pingyang Army?

Ever since then, I've suspected that Shi Hai would eventually resurrect Princess Qinghe, either to blackmail Fu Jian or to bewitch him."

Sima Yao and his ministers had deployed spies to Chang'an, of course, but the spies could only do so much. The intelligence network had fallen apart after Feng Qianyi died. Worse, Murong Chong had ambushed Wang Ziye in the street and burned him alive mere hours after a private conversation with Fu Jian; paranoia inside the Qin court would be running high for a while. Some said that Murong Chong had done it at Fu Jian's behest, but that seemed unlikely, given that Fu Jian was a vocal supporter of the pro-war faction.

Xiang Shu finally spoke up. "How do we deal with the drought fiend camp in Longmen Gorge at Luoyang?"

Xie An shook his head and held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"In the end, Fu Jian removed Murong Chong from his post in the military and ordered him to return to Luoyang alone to reflect on his mistakes," said Xie Shi.

The palace fell silent for a long time.

"I don't think Wang Ziye died," Xiang Shu said finally. "Assuming he *is* Shi Hai, fire wouldn't be enough to kill him."

Chen Xing glanced at Xiang Shu. "I don't think he's dead either."

"Agreed," said Feng Qianjun.

"But for now, at least, he is missing," Xie An said. "Rumor in Chang'an has it Murong Chong assassinated the Han minister leading the pro-war faction in order to obstruct the southern expedition. Aside from those who were there, no one knows the real story."

Sima Yao smoothed his sparse hair back against his head, then quickly pulled his hand away when he remembered his receding hairline. He looked up and rearranged his hair. “If Shi Hai is that formidable, why didn’t he just kill Murong Chong?”

“That would put him at odds with the Xianbei Murong clan,” said Xiang Shu. “Wang Ziye wants Fu Jian to assemble troops and fight his way across the Yangtze River, not for the Qin court to collapse. That wouldn’t do him any good. If Shi Hai were truly omnipotent, there would have been no need for him to lie in wait in the Qin court for so many years before he began to move. He had to rely on Fu Jian’s power.”

Fu Jian was the only one Wang Ziye could rely on. Unfortunately for him, the Murong clan commanded immense power in Chang’an. They may not have been able to completely eliminate Wang Ziye, but they had enough influence to amass formidable troops if they wanted to rebel and leave Chang’an. If Wang Ziye’s plan had been revealed, it would have upended the already precarious balance in the city and left Fu Jian with no political allies. It wouldn’t have been easy for Wang Ziye to find himself another king who would hang on his every word.

Xiang Shu’s words had reminded Chen Xing…

If Shi Hai had spent years operating in secrecy as Fu Jian’s advisor, he clearly wasn’t as powerful as they’d initially assumed. Crucially, he couldn’t influence the people around him using demonic sorcery. That was, Chen Xing realized, where Xiang Shu’s fresh confidence came from: Their enemy was not so invincible after all.

This also gave Chen Xing an idea of why Wang Ziye had wanted to capture him and make him into a sacrificial offering. When the Heart

Lamp’s light illuminated the world, it could influence people’s hearts and expel evil. What would happen if the Heart Lamp was refined by resentment? Would the wielder be able to control people’s thoughts at will?

“What do you all plan to do next?” Sima Yao asked Chen Xing.

Chen Xing figured they’d still go to Luoyang and get rid of the drought fiend army at Longmen Gorge, although there was no longer any need for the Great Jin to send an envoy. The Qin state had ended up being consumed by infighting before Xie An could even send someone to drive a wedge between its factions. And Murong Chong had temporarily lost his power and wouldn’t be able to influence Fu Jian until he regained it; sending a delegation would only add to the trouble. If Wang Ziye was indeed Shi Hai, he would resurface sooner or later, and burning a single drought fiend camp wasn’t going to help much—he could always create a new army.

“We wait,” Xiang Shu said, without waiting for Chen Xing’s answer. “We wait for Shi Hai to reappear.” Chen Xing glanced at him. He realized that, at some point, the exorcists had started treating Xiang Shu as their leader. They all seemed to wait for his plans, his decisions. “In the next few days,” Xiang Shu went on, “please send more scouts to search along the earth veins for Wang Ziye’s whereabouts. I’ve already given Xie An the map of the Divine Land.”

“All right,” Sima Yao said, clearly very relaxed today. He waved his hand airily. “Then We’ll have to trouble the Great Chanyu—I mean the Protector—for assistance.”

“The map from which period?” Chen Xing asked Xiang Shu.

“During the months you were unconscious, I found the geographical distribution of the Divine Land’s earth veins among the Xiang family’s ancient scrolls.”

“How do you know… Oh, right, that makes sense. Xiang Shu, you’re so smart!” Chen Xing exclaimed, recalling that day in Kuaiji, deep underground, when the mysterious man issuing instructions to Wen Zhe had dived into the earth vein and used its natural flow as his escape route. If Wang Ziye wanted to escape again, he might have employed the same method. “You really are! You’re so clear-headed! How did you remember that?! I’d completely forgotten about it!”

Xiang Shu sometimes found himself wrong-footed by Chen Xing’s behavior, especially the way he always blurted out whatever was on his mind. They were in the middle of a serious discussion with a large group of people, and here was Chen Xing showering him with unreserved praise—not once but three times in a row!—in front of everyone. Worse, Chen Xing’s response made it seem as if the exorcists had come in with no plans at all. He was about to make them a laughingstock.

Xiang Shu cleared his throat, hard, and for a moment, things in the room became awkward. But Xie An saved them all with a quick subject change.

“I have another matter from yesterday that I want to discuss with everyone here.”

“There’s nothing much to discuss,” said Sima Yao. “Chen-xiansheng, We have a request: We would like to give you the Director of the Imperial Secretariat.”

“What? What do you mean?”

Pu Yang stepped in. “After much consideration, His Majesty has decided to loan Xie An-daren to the Exorcism Department so that he can act as…act as…uh, the department’s head records keeper? He’ll take up a post as an exorcist to support Chen-xiansheng. From this point on, if you require anything, be it money or manpower, you need only ask Xie-xiansheng.”

Chen Xing was taken aback. “Why would I want more… You know what, Xie-shixiong, I’ll say this: It’s not that I don’t think you’re good enough, but aren’t you a pillar of our country? Why would you leave that behind to come play second fiddle at the Exorcism Department? What about the Beifu Army? Don’t you care about them anymore?”

“The Beifu army finished their training long ago,” Xie An said with a cordial smile, “so my support is not an urgent need. Besides, His Majesty sees me as a hindrance to him. My two nephews will take over my duties in the interim. Xiaoshidi, I’m going to exorcise demons on imperial orders—you won’t make things difficult for His Majesty, will you?”

Xiang Shu didn’t want to continue with this nonsense. “Okay, then it’s settled.”

For a moment, Feng Qianjun wondered if Sima Yao was sending Xie An over to monitor them—but if Sima Yao wanted to plant a spy, Xie An, whose position was akin to that of the Qin’s Grand Chancellor, would be the last person he’d pick. That would have been madness! Besides, with Xie An’s support, they could rely on the Jin court for any kind of assistance they might desire. It was clear that this was Sima Yao’s solution to Chen Xing’s proposal; he intended to take the request seriously, but because it involved the dispute between the Hu and Han peoples, he was using Xie An as his scapegoat.

Chen Xing opened his mouth to say, *Settled, my ass!* but he decided to hold his tongue when everyone else started clapping.

“Congratulations on taking your new office, Uncle!” Xie Xuan said, beaming.

“Xie-qing, you’ve finally realized your dream,” said Sima Yao. “Aren’t you going to thank Us?”

Grinning, Xie An got right up and cupped his hands. “Many thanks to Your Majesty,” he said. Then, to Xiang Shu, “I look forward to working with the Protector Martial God, the Great Exorcist, Feng-daren, Xiao-daren, and everyone else.”

Xie An’s wish had finally been fulfilled. At his advanced age, in the sunset of his life, he had fulfilled his childhood dream of becoming an exorcist.

Chapter 68

THAT NIGHT, Xie An organized a small welcome banquet for himself and invited his wife and his whole family to join. “Come,” he said, “I’d like to propose a toast to you all!”

Feng Qianjun raised his cup. “A toast to Xie-daren!” Xiao Shan and Xiang Shu made a token gesture in response.

“Xie-shixiong, you really won’t give up, will you?” said Chen Xing, expressionless. He’d thought Xie An’s interest in becoming an exorcist was a passing fancy, not something he’d go so far as to pester the emperor about in order to force his way into the Exorcism Department.

“This is the finest wine my husband has in his cellar,” Xie An’s wife declared, smiling as she poured drinks for the younger guests. She was the sister of the renowned scholar Liu Tan and hailed from a prestigious family in Jiangnan. “It’s quite strong, so everyone should take it slowly. Ever since you all arrived, my husband has been going on and on about wanting to lend a hand to Chen-daren.”

“You can’t leave me out anymore when it comes time to slay dragons,” Xie An chimed in. Chen Xing raised a hand to his forehead, exasperated.

“Just worry about keeping yourself alive,” said Xiang Shu.

“Of course,” Xie An replied cheerfully. “Xiaoshidi, I’ve been practicing all sorts of techniques lately in preparation for the Revival of All Magic. I’ll be useful to you when the time comes!” He looked at his wife. “All right, dear, you should get some rest. We’re going to talk shop now.”

Lady Liu smiled and excused herself. Chen Xing couldn't keep from chuckling when he looked at Xie An. Despite his age and his exalted rank, Xie An still clung to the aspirations of his youth. In contrast, Chen Xing realized it was he who had been too fixated and unable to let go.

"All right, then." Chen Xing raised his cup. "Welcome, Xie-shixiong. From now on, we'll be in your care."

"Now that's the spirit!" Xie An declared with a hearty laugh, slapping the table.

Xie An continued to drink with the others, and before long, the conversation shifted to topics like Shi Hai, the Divine Land, the Heart Lamp, the Acala Blade, and even everything that had happened three centuries ago. Now that Xie An had finally become an exorcist, these stories no longer felt like distant tales; they were right within his reach. It made the discussion more animated, and he spoke as if, in just a few months, spiritual qi would return to the world and they would all walk together down a bright and promising path.

Did this, Chen Xing wondered, count as the re-establishment of the Exorcism Department? He was set to leave in two years, and once he was gone, Xiang Shu would likely leave the department and return north to reclaim his position as Great Chanyu. Maybe establishing the new Exorcism Department in the south and handing it over to Xie An when the time came would be the best move.

Xie An was evidently curious about the illusory realm. He asked a number of questions about it., "So, the illusory realm—is it the same as what's inside the Yin Yang Mirror?"

“To be precise,” Chen Xing replied, “the illusory realm isn’t an independent world, not in the way you might think. The term illusory realm exists in contrast to the physical world. The Divine Land, the world that ordinary people see, is the physical world. What exorcists perceive, beneath the physical world, includes the earth veins, spiritual energy, yao, and demons—that is what’s called the illusory realm. The physical world is the surface, and the illusory realm is the underlayer. That’s the idea.”

“So I’ve finally caught a glimpse of the illusory realm,” Xie An said, a spark of wonder in his voice.

Chen Xing chuckled. “Well…you could say that. But exorcists aren’t what you imagine—they’re not immortal, ageless, omnipotent beings capable of flying through the air and burrowing through the earth. We have our limitations too. You might find it disappointing.”

“I get it, I get it!” Xie An nodded earnestly. “Immortality has never crossed my mind. As for magic, it’s like martial arts families teaching their disciples. The first rule is never to use their skills recklessly against an unarmed person. That’s an unwritten rule.”

Chen Xing’s answering smile was wry. “That’s not always true. A person who claims to be the world’s greatest martial artist often threatens to beat me to death.”

Xiang Shu didn’t respond. Xiao Shan, however, had had a bit to drink and become more talkative. “Who wants to kill you?!” He sounded displeased.

Chen Xing waved his hand to convey that it was just a joke, then turned back to Xie An. “I usually can’t take proper care of Xiao Shan, so I’ll have to trouble you to look after him, Shixiong.”

“Xiao Shan is a good kid,” Xie An said with a laugh. “When we go out to subdue yao, he’ll take care of me more than I will of him.”

Xiang Shu’s expression darkened just a bit. Sensing danger, Feng Qianjun dispelled the tension with a laugh of his own. “Why do you say that?”

Chen Xing caught on to what was happening and quickly changed the subject.

“You know each other before?” Xiao Shan asked.

“Yes,” said Xie An, happy to finally have a chance to talk about this. He began to reminisce about his first visit to Mount Hua, when he met Baili Lun and the young Chen Xing. “The first time I saw Xiaoshidi, he was about your age.”

Chen Xing had lived on the mountain from age seven to age sixteen. It felt like a lifetime ago now. Those years had passed in the blink of an eye, and then he’d lived an entire tumultuous life between sixteen and eighteen.

As for Mount Hua, Xie An knew little about it. Chen Xing had many stories to share, but his “interesting stories” mainly revolved around studying medicine with his shifu, reading ancient texts from the Exorcism Department, stitching up wounds on bears, setting broken bones for birds, and fishing behind the mountain—mundane and trivial tasks. Baili Lun rarely spoke, so as a child, Chen Xing had been forced to entertain himself.

It was called seclusion from the world, and for a half-grown child, it was inherently lonely. Chen Xing could relate to Xiao Shan in that way; Xiao Shan’s childhood had probably been similar to his own. As he talked, though, Chen Xing began to sense that his stories were dull and

uninteresting to the rest of them. Xiang Shu was the only one listening attentively.

So Chen Xing stopped. “Ah, forgive me,” he said. “I can’t hold my liquor; I might have gotten a bit too talkative.” Xie An waved his hand, and the group resumed drinking.

“When is your birthday?” Xiang Shu asked Chen Xing.

“Huh?” Chen Xing laughed. “Why are you asking about that? It’s on the seventeenth day of the eighth lunar month.”

This seemed to take everyone by surprise.

“Yesterday?” Xiang Shu was irritated. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t celebrate it. I actually forgot about it myself. When’s yours?”

For a moment, Xiang Shu was silent, avoiding Chen Xing’s curious gaze. “It’s in the second lunar month.”

Feng Qianjun looked up. “Wasn’t that when we first met?”

“The first day of the second lunar month. We met after that.”

“Ah, the first,” Chen Xing echoed. Wait. Wasn’t that the same day he found Xiang Shu in the prison in Xiangyang?!

The topic of conversation shifted again, and Xie An, inspired by Chen Xing’s stories, began reminiscing about his own childhood. The stories he shared were nothing new, though, just his dreams of immortal realms and honorable swordfighters, inspired by the books he read and the folklore he heard. When he was done, the discussion moved again, this time to Xiao Shan.

“Do you remember when your birthday is?” Chen Xing asked him.

Xiao Shan shrugged. He had no idea; he'd been far too young when the Gray Wolf brought him to Carosha.

"It must have been pretty boring when you were in Carosha as a kid," Feng Qianjun said.

"Not boring," Xiao Shan insisted. "Lu Ying played with me. Play on the mountain, play all day."

Xiang Shu glanced at Chen Xing, who smiled and said, "Well, you had it better than I did. My shifu was in poor health, so I just stayed home every day."

Xiao Shan talked more about his time in Carosha. "There are earth veins in Carosha in a mountain cave," he said. "Glowing."

Chen Xing thought about this. "Shi Hai couldn't have gone into hiding in Carosha, right?"

"Does Karakorum have them too?" Xiang Shu asked. "Do you know?"

Xiao Shan shook his head, looking confused, and the conversation moved on.

It was Feng Qianjun's turn next. He shared some childhood stories, including his days with his older brother and his time learning swordsmanship from a vagabond. Thinking of Feng Qianyi, they all sighed mournfully.

"I'd never have expected Qianyi to end up in such a state," said Xie An, who had known him personally.

Feng Qianjun sighed again. "I need to avenge my brother. That's the only way I can put this matter to rest and marry Qing-er with peace of

mind.”

“The world doesn’t wait for anyone, Qianjun,” Xie An told him. “I watched you and your brother grow up. Do what needs to be done, but focus on the present and don’t worry too much about the future.”

With a pang in his heart, Chen Xing thought of himself, then of Xiang Shu. He looked over at Xiang Shu with a trace of melancholy in his eyes, but Xiang Shu avoided his gaze.

It was Xiang Shu’s turn to speak, but instead, he drained his wine and stood up. “I’ll head out.”

The others booed him, but Chen Xing just shook his head. He knew Xiang Shu—he wasn’t one to talk about the past. Since he left Chi Le Chuan behind, he seemed to have all but forgotten his history there. Chen Xing was the sole witness to those days, and he was the only one who remembered it all.

Xie An motioned to Chen Xing, encouraging him to go check on Xiang Shu. Chen Xing finished a few more bites of food, then got to his feet. “I’m heading to bed. You all carry on drinking.”

As the banquet lingered on the verge of ending, Chen Xing stepped into the crisp autumn night, and the cool breeze and clear moonlight washed over him. He’d intended to return to his room, but instead he found himself wandering to the courtyard outside Xiang Shu’s residence.

“Protector, are you asleep?” he called out.

There was no reply from inside. Gently pushing open the half-closed gate, Chen Xing entered and found the room’s door wide open, revealing Xiang Shu standing at a desk under the warm glow of the lamp. Wearing only knee-length undergarments and wooden sandals, with his upper body

bare, he was all lean, taut muscle. His pale yet well-sculpted shoulders and back were a work of art. He embodied the ideal of a man who looked slim in clothes and athletic out of them.

“You’ve got the wrong room,” Xiang Shu said flatly.

“No, I haven’t.” Chen Xing smiled. “I came to check on you.”

A map of the Divine Land was spread across the desk, and there were three sheets of paper beside it that bore Xiang Shu’s handwriting. The papers were held down by the seashell bracelet that Xiang Shu had purchased at the Autumn Deity Festival market. As Chen Xing entered, Xiang Shu stashed the bracelet away quickly—but not quickly enough. Chen Xing didn’t remark on it.

“Anyway, you’re one to talk,” he chuckled. “Lecturing me? Put on some clothes before you catch a cold.” Halfway through the drinks, Xiang Shu had returned to the map, likely still searching for the Dinghai Pearl.

Xiang Shu frowned a little. “I’m fine,” he said quietly. “I’ve been drinking, so I need to let the heat dissipate. I’m thinking about the earth veins and the ‘Ten Thousand Spirits Array.’ Are you certain that’s really what he called it?”

There’d been no witnesses to Chen Xing’s conversation with Sima Wei, but Chen Xing remembered every word clearly. He nodded. “I’m sure of it.”

Xiang Shu glanced at him. “Come and look,” he said.

Chen Xing moved to his side. The alcohol had left Xiang Shu’s bare skin flushed, and standing so close, Chen Xing found the heat radiating from his body almost overwhelming. The flush that crept up his own neck didn’t help matters, of course. Xiang Shu’s masculine aura was

domineering, and it enveloped Chen Xing completely, making his heart race and his breath hitch as he stepped into Xiang Shu's magnetic field.

"Starting from Carosha…" Xiang Shu dipped his long index finger in cinnabar and marked the northernmost point on the map. "This is what Xiao Shan's words brought to mind."

"The earth vein nodes?" Chen Xing made note of the mark as well, but with a half-naked hunk standing next to him, it was hard not to get distracted. He was finding Xiang Shu increasingly charming lately, and it kept distracting him. His heart raced faster and faster with each glance.

Unable to resist, he stole a quick glance at Xiang Shu, and Xiang Shu happened to turn his head at the same moment. Their faces were so close that they could feel each other's breath. Xiang Shu's carried a floral fragrance from the wine, and it made Chen Xing's heart beat even harder.

Xiang Shu turned away awkwardly but didn't move any farther from Chen Xing. "Yes. Now, let's look at Karakorum. If there are earth veins there too… I think I'll write a letter and have Xie An send it to Shi Mokun, asking him to investigate the earth beneath Karakorum for us."

Chen Xing watched Xiang Shu mark two more locations with his cinnabar-coated finger. "So?"

"Jiankang and Kuaiji." Xiang Shu marked a third spot. "Jiangnan."

Chen Xing hummed and tilted his head, examining the map. "That's three. You really must have read a lot of ancient texts to know so much about earth veins."

"This is knowledge passed down from my mother's side. It's nothing strange. Next, let's look at the places where the drought fiends have appeared. The next one is Chi Le Chuan."

The northern region outside the Great Wall already had three marked points.

“Then Chang’an.” Xiang Shu marked the Central Plains area with vermilion. “And then in the south there’s Xiangyang, and the Longzhong Mountain area connected to Xiangyang.”

“That’s also where we first encountered the drought fiends,” Chen Xing pointed out. He still remembered it vividly.

“What does it look like?” Xiang Shu asked. “Have you noticed it yet?”

Chen Xing looked at the six points on the map and recalled what Sima Wei had said about the seven components of the Ten Thousand Spirits Array across the Divine Land. There was still one missing. “Do you think these points are all on earth veins? What about the seventh one?”

Xiang Shu finally marked the seventh point in Luoyang. “What about now?”

Chen Xing studied the map for a while. Xiang Shu connected the points from north to south, forming a bended line that passed through Carosha, Karakorum, and the Yin Mountains in Chi Le Chuan. When he connected Luoyang, a rectangle appeared in the Central Plains.

The four cities of the Central Plains—Chang’an, Xiangyang, Jiankang, and Luoyang—formed the bowl’s rim. The three northern locations formed the handle.

“The seven stars of the Big Dipper!” Chen Xing exclaimed in amazement.

“The Tianquan Star is in Luoyang. If my guess is right, these seven places all need an abundance of resentment for the Ten Thousand Spirits

Array to be activated. Shi Hai's plans in Xiangyang, Carosha, Karakorum, Chi Le Chuan, and Chang'an should have already succeeded, but we interfered and took away his magical artifacts. As for Wen Zhe and his jiao…"

"They were collecting resentment for Jiankang," Chen Xing murmured.

Xiang Shu nodded. "Luoyang is next. But since we have the magical artifacts and Shi Hai lacks the tools he needs, he shouldn't be able to use his black magic to make the Divine Land into his array foundation for now."

Chen Xing had always thought that there were seven separate "Ten Thousand Spirits Arrays," but he hadn't been able to find any actual individual formations. Now, it seemed that perhaps there was no formation—or, rather, that the arrangement of the Big Dipper along the earth veins of the Central Plains was itself the formation. In other words, Shi Hai's original plan was to send a drought fiend king to each of these locations, wait for Fu Jian's army to march south, then revive the Demon God, Chiyou, in one grand sacrifice.

"Tomorrow, I'll go to Nanping Mountain," Xiang Shu said. "It's late now. Go get some rest."

Chen Xing hummed noncommittally. Xiang Shu flicked his fingers, and a gust of wind extinguished the lantern.

Chen Xing had hoped to use the warmth of the wine to engage Xiang Shu in conversation, but it seemed that Xiang Shu had nothing to say to him that didn't have to do with the Exorcism Department. For the first time, Chen Xing fully understood Xiang Shu's earlier remark: "Do you have nothing else in your head?"

Xiang Shu clearly had no intention of keeping him there, so Chen Xing had no choice but to leave. As he stepped out, though, he saw Xiang Shu take out a Qiang flute and sit on a low couch in the courtyard, where he rested his foot on the edge of the well and tested the flute's sound.

"Are you going to play the Qiang flute?" Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu glanced up and frowned, seeming disinterested. "Aren't you leaving?"

Reluctantly, Chen Xing turned to leave. He'd walked only a few steps when he heard the familiar notes of the Fusheng Melody start up behind him. It was a softer version than the one Xiang Shu had played in Karakorum, without the same heroic intensity. As the music drifted to Chen Xing on the autumn wind, it stopped him in his tracks.

He turned back for one last glance. The bare skin of Xiang Shu's upper body was bathed in the bright moon's silver glow. His pants were as white as the moonlight, and an azure silk headband dangled from his temples. With his closed eyes, his focused expression, and his incredible poise, he could have been carved from jade.

Cast against the music of the flute, the flowing water, the towering ornamental mountain, and the vast autumn bamboo in the Xie residence all seemed to come to life under the moonlight. The music was telling Chen Xing something, something he hadn't grasped when he heard it in Karakorum.

When it began, the song's lonely first passage made Chen Xing think of Xianyang, and the day they first met. He could almost see it again. Had Xiang Shu embedded a memory into the Fusheng Melody?

And before long, the melody changed, now bearing the grandeur of a thousand nations, evoking Chang'an's flourishing winds. With another subtle shift, it suggested the desolate plains of Chi Le Chuan.

Was he overthinking? Or was Xiang Shu really reminiscing through the Qiang flute?

Chen Xing returned to his room, took out the guqin, and plucked a few strings, synchronizing the notes with Xiang Shu's Fusheng Melody. Although their bedrooms were far apart, the music carried; there was a brief stutter in Xiang Shu's flute playing, as if the sudden sound of the guqin had disrupted his thoughts.

In the space of a breath, however, Xiang Shu adapted. Chen Xing played the guqin lightly, and Xiang Shu's Qiang flute seamlessly followed. As the instruments' notes intertwined, there was another shift in the song; this time, it embodied Jiangnan, the notes soft and in perfect harmony. It wasn't just his imagination, Chen Xing realized—Xiang Shu was using the Qiang flute to express something.

But before Chen Xing could grasp the deeper meaning of the Fusheng Melody, Xiang Shu stopped playing, and the Xie residence fell silent again. Chen Xing sat there, lost in the memories embedded in the flute's melody. It felt like a fleeting dream, all shifting lights and shadows, only faintly illuminating a scant few moments from the past. The overall picture was vague and difficult to fully understand.

When a long time had passed without the flute making itself heard again, Chen Xing strummed the guqin gently, producing a soft thrum.

After he put down the Qiang flute, Xiang Shu sat where he was for a while. Just as he was about to rise, he heard the sound of the guqin again.

He sat back down and gazed up at the autumn night sky, where the halo of the moon cast a faint glow.

Chen Xing plucked a few more tremorous notes from the strings, then lowered his head to the guqin and played with flowing ease. The piece was part of “Guangling San,” composed by the Jin dynasty’s Ji Kang in the Three Kingdoms period. Ji Kang had been sentenced to death by the Sima family, and it was said that before his execution, he had played “Guangling San” and then calmly faced his death. The music flowed gracefully, unattached to mortal life, expressing only a connection to the heavens and earth.

Xiang Shu listened for a while, then stood up, opened the door, and walked to the east wing. Standing under the moonlight, he looked down the long corridor. Chen Xing’s expression was peaceful, a smile playing on his lips. It was as if everyone else in the world was asleep and he was entertaining no one but himself. Under his fingers, “Guangling San” carried an air of youthful vitality that posed a stark contrast to Ji Kang’s original intentions.

As a child, Chen Xing had learned the guqin at home, though he rarely played it. His father had once told him that music betrayed a person’s inner thoughts. Now, he finally understood the meaning of those words.

Eventually, Xiang Shu returned to his room to lie down, opening both the courtyard and room doors with a sigh. The red string bracelet was hanging from his index finger, and he held it up in front of him until the sound of the guqin gradually faded. When at last he heard the sound of a door closing nearby, Xiang Shu tossed the bracelet onto the desk with a casual flick of his hand, and it landed with a soft *thump*.

Chapter 69

THE NEXT DAY, as Xiang Shu prepared to go out, Chen Xing showed up in a fresh set of clothes—it was obvious that he intended to come along.

“Did you not sleep well yesterday?” Xiang Shu asked.

The question was directed at Chen Xing, but Xie An was the one who answered. “It’s rare that I don’t have to wake up early to attend court,” he said, his eyes still blurry with sleep, “so if there was any justice in the world, I would have been able to get a good night’s rest. Instead, I had to deal with two birds making a racket all night long. I tossed and turned, but I couldn’t fall asleep. It was dawn by the time I finally managed to get some shut-eye.”

The corners of Chen Xing’s lips twitched. “Birds? How come I didn’t hear any?”

“They were there! One came flying in from the west, the other from the east, and they were chasing each other the entire time. First they were flying like this, then they flew like that…” He gestured to illustrate. “Then the one in the west suddenly stopped moving, so the one in the east was just screeching by my ear. Don’t you guys think it’s strange?”

Xiang Shu glowered at Xie An. Chen Xing, for his part, was utterly lost.

“I’m leaving now,” Xiang Shu announced.

“I’m going with you,” Chen Xing declared, standing up.

“Hey! Hey!” Xie An laughed. “What’s the hurry? Bring me along too! Don’t think about leaving me behind!”

“Xiang Shu,” Chen Xing said, “what will we do if you go off on your own and leave me alone and then Shi Hai comes along and kidnaps me again?”

“Right!” Xie An agreed. “If an enemy comes along, my old bones won’t be up to the fight.”

“Chen Xing! Where are you guys going?” shouted Xiao Shan. “I’m going too!”

Chen Xing couldn’t say no.

Xiang Shu had intended to take a fast horse and make it a quick journey, but it was turning out more like an autumn vacation. Xie An called for a carriage and sent someone to inform Feng Qianjun. Feng Qianjun arrived with Gu Qing in tow, and it just so happened that Xie Daoyun had been on her way out to find Gu Qing, so in the end, it was a parade of exorcists plus two doctors. The herd of them departed from Jiankang together, supposedly in pursuit of official business, but in actuality to enjoy themselves at Mount Nanping. The autumn skies were clear and the air was crisp; why not go fly kites?

In ancient times, Chibi had been known as Puqi. The mountain range stretched out endlessly, like the dragon veins that ran through the skies above and the earth below—the veins that connected the three summits of Mount Chibi, Mount Nanping, and Mount Jinluan.

Snow-white clouds shrouded the lofty peaks that towered over the Yangtze River and the vast Lake Hong. Maple leaves, red as fire in the

autumn wilds, spilled over golden ginkgo trees, and bands of elm, mulberry, and sycamore trees stretched out for miles; all of this beauty was reflected in Lake Hong's blue-green waters. On one mountain, a breathtaking waterfall draped over steep cliffs like a white sash. Its clear waters flowed through the mountains, reflecting the cliffs and vistas. Taken together, the scenery almost gave the impression of vibrant minerals that had melted into the mountains and rivers, creating an exquisite painting in strokes of sienna, vermillion, crimson, and forest green.

When the commandant of Wuchang County learned of Xie An's arrival, he quickly sent out a boat for Xie An's use, but Xie An declined. He wouldn't use any of the various small boats moored on the lake at the foot of the mountain, either; he didn't want to be disturbed or to disturb other people. In the end, he abandoned his horse to scale Mount Nanping on foot.

"Where is the Altar of the Seven Stars?" Xiang Shu asked.

"It's halfway up the mountain," Xie An replied, "on the cliff facing Lake Hong. Come on, I'll lead you all there."

It was a drizzly, mist-shrouded afternoon. Xie An had traversed many of the Divine Land's renowned mountains in his youth, and his memory was excellent, so he had no trouble leading everyone up Mount Nanping with a paper umbrella in his hand. In fact, he all but flew up the mountain, and with only a few turns, he left the rest of them in his dust. Chen Xing, meanwhile, brought up the rear of the procession, clutching his robe to hold the hem up off the ground as he climbed. He had no hope of catching up to Xie An.

Xie Daoyun walked beside Xiao Shan for a while, but when she glanced back to Chen Xing and saw that he was struggling, she stopped,

called his name, and waited for him.

Chen Xing found a smile for her, although he was wheezing. “You and Xiao Shan get along pretty well.”

During the time Chen Xing had been confined to bed, Xie Daoyun often came to check on him, and over the course of several encounters, she and Xiao Shan had gotten to know each other. She’d also arranged that little competition between herself and Xiao Shan to keep Xiao Shan occupied while Chen Xing, Xiang Shu, and Feng Qianjun spoke with Sima Yao.

“That little guy is always worried sick about you,” Xie Daoyun told him. “Why are you so heartless in return?”

“When have I ever been heartless?” Chen Xing asked, bewildered. Xie Daoyun snorted but didn’t respond, and Chen Xing peered at her with suspicion. “You aren’t harboring any untoward thoughts toward my adopted son, are you?”

Xie Daoyun’s expression darkened. “Exorcist, what goes on in your head?” she demanded. Yes, she often spent time with Xiao Shan, but she treated him as a younger brother. Their unexpected companionship had just caught Chen Xing by surprise.

Chen Xing knew, of course, that Xiao Shan would grow up quickly. It was possible that in only a few years, he would find someone he liked. The customs of the Jin dynasty held that fourteen was the minimum age for marriage, and for the Xiongnu people, marriage could happen even earlier. In Chen Xing’s heart, however, he felt that Xiao Shan was much too young. Xiao Shan may have grown a lot over the preceding half year, but he was still only twelve years old.

Thinking things over, Chen Xing admitted to himself that he was, as Xie Daoyun had said, heartless. He wanted Xiao Shan to grow up quickly, or at least not find it too hard to let go of him when the time came… He hoped, at the very least, that Xiao Shan would find it easier to say goodbye to him than he'd found saying goodbye to Lu Ying. If Chen Xing held on too tightly and treated Xiao Shan like a child who would never grow up, how could Xiao Shan become an independent adult when Chen Xing was no longer around? That was why Chen Xing had stopped treating Xiao Shan like a child the way he had when they were in Karakorum and started treating him as a fellow adult. He still taught Xiao Shan how to read and write, but he avoided expressing too much affection. He encouraged Xiao Shan to make friends and spend time around more people so that he wouldn't feel like Chen Xing was the only one he had to lean on.

Chen Xing was confident that Xiao Shan understood. After their reunion in Kuaiji, Chen Xing had expended tremendous effort apologizing to him and explaining his thinking. During that conversation, Xiao Shan had looked slightly confused, but afterward, he began to understand the "familiar but not too intimate" approach that Chen Xing took with him. He knew that Chen Xing was urging him to grow up so that one day, he would be able to face the world on his own.

On the mountainside, things grew awkward between Chen Xing and Xie Daoyun. It seemed that Chen Xing was mistaken in his assumption that Xie Daoyun wanted to snatch Xiao Shan away and become his adopted mother.

"I don't have any untoward thoughts about him!" Xie Daoyun protested. "I want him to be my shifu!"

“Ohhh.” What a relief! Chen Xing nodded and hastily raised his hands in surrender. “I don’t have any objections to that. Did he agree?”

Chen Xing knew that Xiao Shan was fond of Xie Daoyun too. He hadn’t realized that Xie Daoyun was looking for a master who could teach her martial arts, but now that he thought about it, it was evident that Xie Daoyun had learned some martial arts already. Most of the Xie family wouldn’t have allowed her to use swords or spears; Xie An was the only one who was open-minded in that regard. Xiang Shu didn’t have the spare time to teach her, and it wasn’t appropriate for Feng Qianjun to exchange blows with his fiancée’s best friend, so Xiao Shan was Xie Daoyun’s only remaining choice.

“Xiao-shifu said that he wanted to discuss it with you. You get it now?”

Chen Xing nodded. He realized that, up ahead, Xiang Shu had slowed down and was listening in on their conversation. Xie Daoyun stopped talking and walked on ahead of him, proceeding to the head of the procession.

“You guys go on ahead. I’ll meet you there.” Chen Xing leaned against a tree, panting. “I need to rest for a bit.”

“I told you not to come along,” Xiang Shu reminded him peevishly. Chen Xing was frail, having just recovered from a severe illness, and the damage his heart chakra had received made it even harder for him to catch his breath.

Everybody looked at Chen Xing. For a moment, it looked like Xiao Shan would say something, but in the end he stopped himself.

“Then Xiao Shan and I will go ahead and scout out the situation,” said Feng Qianjun. He nudged Xiao Shan, encouraging him to go on ahead.

Chen Xing mopped some of the sweat off his face and forced a smile.

Xiang Shu waited for a while. “Forget it,” he said at last. “I’ll carry you.”

“No need. I’m fine. Xie-shixiong’s physical strength… How is he so athletic?”

Xiang Shu didn’t force the issue. Everybody else had already walked on ahead, leaving only Xiang Shu by Chen Xing’s side. They set off again.

As if his poor stamina wasn’t enough, Chen Xing’s feet kept slipping during the climb. The fog thickened and curled around them as they went, and rain began to fall in short bursts, soaking through Chen Xing and Xiang Shu’s outer robes.

“I remember when you climbed Carosha with me,” Chen Xing said. “You were just as impatient as you are now. Can’t you just slow down a bit?”

Xiang Shu took a deep breath, ready to reproach him, but Chen Xing wasn’t done.

“All right,” he said, dejected, “I…I’ll return to Jiankang. I’ll stop holding you all back. I knew you were going to get angry.” He sighed. “I’ve been on tenterhooks since we set out today, worried I might accidentally make you unhappy again. Sorry. I’ll head back now.”

Ever since Chen Xing realized that he kind of liked—well, no, that he really liked Xiang Shu, he found himself constantly thinking about Xiang Shu’s attitude toward him and interpreting it in different ways. He’d also stopped teasing Xiang Shu and making fun of him, which Xiang Shu

seemed to have noticed—for some reason, it occasionally made him furious. Every time Xiang Shu tried to get Chen Xing to behave differently, Chen Xing ignored him and refused to cooperate, irritating Xiang Shu further. This tended to continue until an opening appeared that Xiang Shu could use to teach Chen Xing a lesson.

This time, however, Xiang Shu didn't respond verbally. He just reached out and grasped Chen Xing's hand, leading him up the mountain road at a slow pace.

Raindrops pattered to the ground around them, keeping time with the wild beating of Chen Xing's heart. His fingers twitched a little as he let himself be led, and without hesitation, Xiang Shu tightened his grip, pressing their palms firmly together. Chen Xing looked up at the side of Xiang Shu's face, feeling as if he'd never understood Xiang Shu at all. Xiang Shu had always teetered between being quick to anger and being incredibly gentle…so gentle that it was a little unlike him.

Chen Xing didn't think that anyone in the world understood Xiang Shu as well as he did. Things were, after all, best understood by comparison to their opposites.

Xiang Shu was looking back at Chen Xing, studying him as if there was something he wanted to say. Chen Xing swung their hands between them to tell him that it was all right and he could say it, whatever it was. Xiang Shu yielded.

"Sometimes I feel this constant, groundless irritation. Could it be caused by some sort of evil tendency?"

"Evil tendency?" Chen Xing echoed, bemused.

“It’s like there’s some sort of uncontrollable force trapped inside my heart. It’s constantly seeking an outlet, trying to break free.” As he spoke, Xiang Shu seemed to have a lot on his mind. “Sometimes, I do want to communicate properly, but for some reason, with you, I always grow impatient… Never mind.”

It’s not just me you treat like this, Chen Xing thought. *You’re impatient with everyone, and sometimes you don’t even bother to talk at all. You’re actually pretty nice to me in comparison.…*

Perhaps this was why Xiang Shu was so skilled in martial arts. Chen Xing had always sensed a tinge of madness in Xiang Shu’s martial arts, some unstoppable strength on the brink of spilling over. Maybe it had something to do with his extreme self-repression. Most of the time, Xiang Shu was clear-headed and rational, so much so that it amazed Chen Xing, but inevitably, whenever the two of them were alone, out came Xiang Shu’s irritable side. It made Chen Xing wary of saying the wrong thing.

“I wanted you to come,” Xiang Shu said plainly. “Yes, I wanted you to come along today.”

A smile broke over Chen Xing’s face, full of youthful joy. With those simple words, Xiang Shu had banished the cloud over Chen Xing’s heart. Yet the only words he could find in response were, “Oh, okay.”

“The landscapes in the south really are beautiful. Come on, let’s go.”

Chen Xing’s mood lightened considerably. Xiang Shu released his hand, letting him walk by himself. When they reached a turn in the mountain road, he turned back to look at Chen Xing, his gaze betraying some kind of complicated emotion.

“What plans do you have for after the Restoration of All Magic?” Xiang Shu asked.

The question took Chen Xing by surprise. Why was Xiang Shu thinking about that? “Find a place in Jiankang to live, maybe? I’d probably find some way to make a living.”

Now they’d hiked up the foothills, the fog was starting to clear. They reached the edge of a high cliff and stood shoulder to shoulder, looking down at Lake Hong at the foot of Mount Nanping.

“Didn’t you want to see the sights across the Divine Land?” Xiang Shu asked. “Have you changed your mind?” Perhaps their trip to Mount Nanping had reminded Xiang Shu of their previous conversation, back on the ship.

“That’s right. I forgot.” Chen Xing smiled. “Thanks for reminding me.”

Once in a while, when he had nothing else to do, Chen Xing would calculate how much time he had left. He only had two years more, and the road ahead was far thornier than he had ever anticipated. At this point, there were no other dreams he wanted to fulfill—defeating Shi Hai would be no mean feat, and he wasn’t going to have any time to spare for a vacation after that. He figured that he might as well find somewhere quiet to live out the last of his days.

That was the response he’d blurted out when Xiang Shu asked him about his plans. But from Xiang Shu’s perspective, he was contradicting himself, and Chen Xing saw that it had made him suspicious. Xiang Shu was studying him doubtfully, and Chen Xing squirmed under his gaze, guilt nagging at him.

He ducked away awkwardly. “What about you?” he asked. “Do you want to return to the north?”

Xiang Shu was standing tall at the cliff’s edge. “If I wanted to travel far and wide,” he asked nonchalantly, “would you be able to keep up with me?”

Chen Xing began to smile. “What? Does that mean you’re going to come with me? I’m afraid that the journey will be nothing but you scolding me, then.”

The fog was seeping in once more, and it swept over the cliffside then. As the mist slowly shrouded him from view, Xiang Shu said, “I am.” Then he turned away and started walking toward the top of the mountain again.

Chen Xing was dumbfounded. He couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. “Huh? What did you say? Wait for me, Xiang Shu!”

As he turned, preoccupied, he almost stepped right out into thin air. Xiang Shu was ready for him, though. Without even looking, he grabbed Chen Xing’s hand and pulled him back to safety. Chen Xing broke out in a cold sweat all the same—he had almost fallen again, and the mountain road was steep. If he slipped here, he’d end up rolling all the way down the mountain.

Xiang Shu peered at Chen Xing. “If I don’t come with you, you won’t even make it across the Yangtze River.”

Chen Xing smiled sheepishly.

On a ledge high up on the side of Mount Nanping was the Altar of the Seven Stars. By the time Chen Xing and Xiang Shu closed in on it, the

sun was shining down once more. Xiao Shan and Xie Daoyun were under a tree, feeding a squirrel, and Feng Qianjun and Gu Qing watched them from off to the side, holding hands.

The Altar of the Seven Stars was once a Daoist site where Zhuge Liang had summoned the east wind. After the Battle of Chibi, the Jin people had transported bricks and stone up the mountain to rebuild the altar in homage to the decisive role it had played in that unprecedented battle. But since the southern migration of the scholars, the altar had seen very few visitors.

Xie An stood to the side of the altar, fan in hand, chatting leisurely with Feng Qianjun. “I’ve mentioned this place to His Majesty many times this year. My hope is that he’ll be able to pay it a visit one day.”

“If Baldy wants to climb this mountain, he’d better be ready to be exhausted at the end,” Feng Qianjun replied.

Xie An laughed. “It’s worth it when these are the fruits of your labor.”

Xiang Shu had just reached the ledge when he heard those words. He understood what Xie An was saying: He wanted to give Sima Yao and the other Jin court officials some confidence. Xiang Shu took over the conversation to explain it to Feng Qianjun. “There are only four battles in recorded history where a victory was achieved with minor losses: Julu, Guandu, Chibi, and Yiling. One of them happened here.”

In the Battle of Julu, Xiang Yu sank the boats his own men had used to cross the river, giving his troops no choice but to soundly rout the Qin army. In the Battle of Guandu, Cao Cao’s twenty thousand soldiers slaughtered their way through the three hundred thousand men of Yuan

Shao's army until their enemies turned tail and fled, tossing aside their armor and helmets as they went. Chibi, of course, needed no elaboration—and then there was the last battle of the Three Kingdoms period, Lu Xun's torching of the Shu camp. These four great historical battles were all won by the side with inferior numbers, feats that required top-notch commanders. Those four commanders—Xiang Yu, Cao Cao, Zhou Yu, and Lu Xun—all became famous because of these battles, their names preserved for eternity.

"Remember, too, that Xiang Yu, the Hegemon of Jiangdong, seems to have been the ancestor of the Protector Martial Gods," Xie An said, smiling.

Xiang Shu didn't respond to that. He looked up at the dilapidated Altar of the Seven Stars, then shifted his gaze down to stare at the cliff below. Chen Xing was shocked that Xiang Shu knew so much about the history of the Han people. He must have spent quite a while studying it when he was learning about the art of war.

"Of the four battles," Xiang Shu said, "three took place in Jiangdong. All the soldiers who took part in those battles were descendants of this land."

"Not bad." Xie An nodded in approval. "Jiangdong has always had good luck, not to mention good talent. You know, Martial God, out of an entire court of literary and military officials, you are the only person aside from me who has told His Majesty, 'It's not like this battle can't be fought.'"

When he heard that, it dawned on Chen Xing just what kind of pressure Xie An was under. Perhaps he should have put it together sooner;

Fu Jian was known as the commander of five hundred thousand, while all of the descendants of Jiangdong put together numbered fewer than seventy thousand. The Jin government must have thought Xie An was crazy for imagining that they could win. Even a miracle like the one in the Battle of Chibi would be of no use against someone like Fu Jian. The Jin were at a disadvantage in numbers, geography, and timing—if Fu Jian crossed south of the Fei River, what hope did they have?

"But even these battles alone have left plenty of classic examples for you Han people to brag about," Xiang Shu pointed out. "Xie An, it wouldn't hurt for you to start preparing. Maybe you'll leave behind a few records of your own in the next Battle of the Fei River."

Xie An smiled. "Martial God, are you interested in—"

"No. I will not lead your soldiers in a fight against my own people. The most I can do is help neither side."

This was precisely what Xie An was hoping he would say. "Then we owe you a debt of gratitude, Protector Martial God."

With that, he turned and saluted Chen Xing. He had grasped the full weight of Xiang Shu's words, even though Chen Xing had not. For all that Xiang Shu had Han ancestry, he had grown up in Chi Le Chuan; he considered himself a Tiele man. If the two nations went to war, how could the Great Chanyu—even a former one—just sit back and watch?

Xiang Shu had made this promise to Xie An because of Chen Xing.

"Have you rested enough?" Xiang Shu asked Chen Xing then. "Stand up and take a look."

Chen Xing stood and walked around the Altar of the Seven Stars. He came to a stop at its center and stood there imagining what it had been like

173 years ago, when Kongming harnessed the east wind. The lofty cliffs were now coated with moss, and any trace of those momentous events was long gone.

The Altar of the Seven Stars faced the Yangtze River and Lake Hong, far in the distance. The three mountains rose behind the exorcists like winding dragons, and before them, the river stretched sword-straight for thousands of miles. Lake Hong glimmered like a massive array. This truly was a place where the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth had converged.

“This really is one of the best spiritual loci out there,” Chen Xing murmured. “It’s also the central point of the entire Divine Land. If Zhang Liu cast a spell using the Dinghai Pearl here, at the Altar of the Seven Stars, he really may have been able to draw the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth into the Pearl.”

A mountain wind blew toward them, making Chen Xing’s white robes billow behind him. He closed his eyes and, with one hand, formed a seal. Standing in the center of the Altar of the Seven Stars, he pretended that he too was casting a spell, just like Kongming and Zhang Liu. If the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth was still present, it would have rushed, boundless and powerful, into his open hands.

Xiang Shu walked behind Chen Xing to study him from that angle. When Chen Xing opened his eyes, he didn’t see Xiang Shu, so he turned around. “What?”

“So Zhang Liu really did cast his spell here,” Feng Qianjun said.

“Yes,” Chen Xing said. “It’s very likely.”

“Would the spell-casting process have left any traces behind?” asked Xiang Shu.

“Even if it did, we wouldn’t find them. It’s been three hundred years.”

“Then what about traces from when Kongming called down the east wind?”

“It’s been over one hundred and seventy years since that, so how… Wait.”

A seed of doubt planted itself in Chen Xing’s heart. Xiang Shu put words to it. “Zhang Liu used the Dinghai Pearl to take away the world’s spiritual qi, causing the Silence of All Magic. If he did that three hundred years ago, then how did Kongming manage to call down the east wind a hundred and thirty years later?”

It defied all logic. Chen Xing was stumped. “That’s right. The Silence of All Magic occurred long before the Three Kingdoms period.”

They all looked at each other.

“Maybe calling down the wind was just a trick?” said Xie An. “Zhuge was well-versed in astronomy and geography, so it stands to reason that he also knew some meteorology. He could have used that to fool Sun Wu.”

This was the only plausible explanation, but for some reason, Chen Xing wasn’t entirely convinced. He looked at Xiang Shu. “This is such an important question. Why didn’t you speak up sooner?”

“I asked you about it before, but you said that it wasn’t important.”

“Could the Dinghai Pearl be in Chibi?” Feng Qianjun asked. “If Shi Hai ambushed Zhang Liu after he took away all the spiritual qi, what’s to say Zhang Liu didn’t hide the Dinghai Pearl somewhere nearby during his escape? If it remains in the mountains, it might have continued to emit a

little spiritual qi. Then, more than a hundred years later, Kongming found the Altar of the Seven Stars. He wouldn't have understood why Mount Nanping was the only place in the world where he could cast spells, but…"

Xie An was thunderstruck. If that was how things had gone down, then they could have an answer on their hands!

"Wait a minute," Chen Xing exclaimed, "let me try!"

He raised his hands to perform a simple spell. It was dusk, and the mountain wind rustling through the trees broke his concentration more than once. It didn't help that he was trembling with excitement; if Feng Qianjun was right, then they might not need to put in so much work to find the Dinghai Pearl!

Gu Qing and Xie Daoyun watched, their eyes full of anticipation. They'd never seen an exorcist cast a spell before. Chen Xing raised a hand and lowered it, then raised it again. He did his best to calm his breathing and compose himself as he thought through possible incantations.

Suddenly, Xiang Shu asked, "Are you sure that after the Silence of All Magic, the only thing that can give off spiritual qi is the Dinghai Pearl?"

"Don't talk to him!" Feng Qianjun and Xie An shouted in unison. "Let him cast his spell," added Xie An. "You can ask later."

Chen Xing tried a few times, but ultimately he had to admit defeat. "Nothing," he said. "I can't find a trace of any spiritual qi flow."

Xiang Shu appeared unruffled. "Is it an issue with the incantation?"

"I don't know," Chen Xing replied, distraught. "It's not like there was any spiritual qi available when I was learning magic… Oh well, I'll answer your question first." He fell silent for a moment, thinking it over. "With the

Silence of All Magic, the Heart Lamp is the only thing that's able to produce mana. It really doesn't make any sense, now that you mention it."

Xiang Shu made a noise in agreement. He had evidently spent a long time considering the question of why the Heart Lamp alone could still be used.

"In addition to the Heart Lamp, there is still some mana left in this world," Chen Xing said. "It's just that there is very, very little. Lu Ying is an example."

Xiang Shu, Chen Xing, and Xiao Shan had all witnessed it: Lu Ying had released a gentle wave of power before he died, restoring life to all of Carosha. How could that have happened if all the mana in the world had truly been lost?

"Where did Lu Ying's power come from?" Xiang Shu asked.

This time, it was Xiao Shan who answered. "His internal core."

"Right," said Chen Xing. "A yao's internal core." Before the Silence of All Magic, yao increased their own innate cultivation levels by absorbing the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth into their bodies and storing it in their internal cores. This gave them the power they needed to survive.

Now, Chen Xing had a rough idea of what had happened. The Dinghai Pearl had taken away only the world's free-flowing spiritual qi. But it was impossible to take the spiritual qi from a yao's internal core, so even after the free-flowing spiritual energy was lost, the yao could still support themselves for a while with the spiritual qi already in their internal cores—like water in a jar. They couldn't replenish the mana in their internal cores, however, and once that mana was used up, it was gone forever.

Lu Ying had been an extraordinarily powerful yao. On top of Zhuyin's dragon power, he also had enough spiritual qi stored up in his core to keep him alive for hundreds of years before he finally passed away. He had even had a little bit of energy to spare at the end.

"The Heart Lamp is kind of like that too," Chen Xing said, deciding that he might as well come clean. "It's powered by the human soul. Unlike spiritual qi, though, the three immortal souls and seven mortal forms can slowly regenerate. They're very weak, but they're like internal cores that provide small but renewable supplies of energy."

"Hmm." Xiang Shu was leaning against the side of the cliff, apparently lost in thought. "So if I were to find the internal core of a yao, I could use it in place of the Heart Lamp to power the Acala Blade."

"Powering it with yao energy… That isn't impossible, in theory," Chen Xing mused. "It's like using resentment, only the type of power is different—yao energy is considered part of the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth. But the Silence of All Magic has been in place for hundreds of years… Even the most powerful of yao will have exhausted the yao energy in their internal cores by now. Not even a phoenix can sustain itself forever."

Chen Xing knew, of course, that Xiang Shu was trying to think of a way to protect him, but he wanted Xiang Shu to let this notion go. He was going to have to find a time for a proper discission about it with Xiang Shu. Still, just the thought of how much Xiang Shu cared about him and wanted him to live a good, long life made his heart ache.

"There is no flow of mana here," Chen Xing reported finally. "At least none that I can detect."

“Why don’t we head back down the mountain?” Feng Qianjun suggested. The sky was already starting to darken. “We can come back up and investigate more tomorrow.”

Xie An had already instructed the guards to bring them to the nearby government manor upon their return. “Don’t worry,” he said, “just treat this as a relaxing trip. You’ve been extremely busy lately. You need the downtime.”

Xie An wasn’t only looking to check out the terrain around Chibi, but to conduct a thorough survey, too. If Fu Jian did send his army south, Jiangnan’s coasts were going to become the Jin army’s front lines and the Yangtze River and southern Chibi its rearguard. In the event that they lost the Fei River, they might be forced to retreat to a more advantageous location for a final, decisive battle.

“You guys head down first,” Xiang Shu said. “Take Xie An back with you so that he can rest. I’m going to stay here a while longer.”

Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu was still unwilling to give up, so he said, “I’ll keep you company.”

The rest of their group made their way down the mountain road, leaving Chen Xing and Xiang Shu alone together.

Fiery rays of evening sunlight transformed the clouds on the horizon into brilliant flames. Far below, on the endless golden waters of Lake Hong, fishermen sang and rowed their boats toward home. Xiang Shu walked up to the Altar of the Seven Stars, looking first down at the stones beneath his feet and then up at the cliff.

“I don’t know what it is,” Chen Xing muttered, “but something is telling me that we’ve come to the right place.”

“Are you hiding something from me?” Xiang Shu asked, ignoring Chen Xing’s comment.

“Huh? No,” Chen Xing said, even as his mind churned with thoughts. “Of course not. What brought this up?”

Xiang Shu was standing before the cliff by the Altar of the Seven Stars, surveying the craggy mountain ridges. His back was to Chen Xing. “Every time we talk about magic or ancient records, it sounds like there’s something you’re holding back. Have you never thought about protecting yourself?”

“Isn’t that what I have you for?” Chen Xing asked, smiling. Xiang Shu frowned. “You really care about my life, huh, Xiang Shu?”

Xiang Shu ignored that too. “Do you remember when we first met in Xiangyang?”

It amused Chen Xing a little, the way neither of them was giving straightforward answers to the other’s questions. They kept talking around each other. “Of course I remember. After you woke up, you tied me up. You’ve been staring at that piece of rock for a long time now. Is it really that pretty?”

Xiang Shu stepped back. “Come here.”

Chen Xing blinked. Xiang Shu pulled his heavy sword out of its sheath on his back, and Chen Xing’s hackles went up. Was there an enemy nearby?

He summoned the Heart Lamp, but Xiang Shu pushed his wrist down and frowned. “I just want you to come take a look.” He stepped aside, then lifted the sword and mimed a diagonal downwards slash against the stone. “What does that look like to you?”

The light of the sunset was growing dim around them, but Chen Xing saw what Xiang Shu meant. “This…this cliff was hewn from the rock. Who could have such strength?”

Xiang Shu walked over to the edge of the cliff and looked down. There was a fissure far below, overgrown with moss and climbing vines. If they removed that greenery, perhaps they’d find remnants of a fierce battle.

Chapter 70

"YOU SHOULD head down first."

"No," Chen Xing insisted. "I want to follow you."

Xiang Shu swept a glance at Chen Xing before wrapping his arm around Chen Xing's waist and leaping off the edge of the cliff.

Chen Xing certainly hadn't seen that coming. "What are you doing?!" he screamed. "Stop! Xiang Shu! Aaahhhhh!!!"

His cry echoed down the mountain, startling Xie An and the others on their trek down. Feng Qianjun jumped. "What happened?!"

Xiao Shan whirled around, but Xie An said, "Stop! Don't! Let's observe from here first!"

A realization dawned on Feng Qianjun. "That earth-shattering scream… Could it have come from the Altar of the Seven Stars?"

"Feng-dage!" Gu Qing called.

From somewhere not too far away, they heard Xiang Shu's voice: "Stop screaming!"

"It hurts so much!" Chen Xing's voice shrieked. "Quick! Stop!"

Xiang Shu was holding Chen Xing around the waist with one arm and a mountain vine with the other as they dropped straight down the cliff. They plunged so fast that Chen Xing's shoulder nearly dislocated.

"You can't go in! There's no room!" Chen Xing cried. Xiang Shu wanted to carry Chen Xing through the crack on the cliff, but with all the

vegetation inside, Chen Xing was certain they couldn't possibly fit.

"Hold my neck!" Xiang Shu shouted. "Don't move around!"

Chen Xing clung onto Xiang Shu's shoulders, and Xiang Shu held the vine securely with one hand while he reached into the fissure with the other. He pulled out a broken piece of wood, and Chen Xing peered curiously into the fissure.

"This won't work!" he said. "Let's change positions, okay?!"

"Don't shout in my ear!" Xiang Shu roared. "I can hear you just fine!"

Down on the mountain road, Feng Qianjun was scandalized. Xiao Shan was just confused.

"Let's continue heading downward. Um, Daoyun…you two should hurry down. It's not appropriate for you to be here right now," Xie An said, rendering Xie Daoyun speechless.

"Xie An!" Xiang Shu yelled. "Can you hear me?! Get over here, quick!"

Xie An immediately turned around and led the others back up the mountain. He reached the fissure to find that Xiang Shu had tied himself and Chen Xing together with a belt.

"Go around to the back and see what's on the opposite side of this crack," Xiang Shu instructed him.

Feng Qianjun tossed Xiang Shu a bow and arrows. "Use this to communicate with us later!"

The sky continued to darken. By the time Xiang Shu and Chen Xing finally squeezed through the fissure, Chen Xing's clothes were a mess. Inside, they found an opening into a narrow space below, and Xiang Shu lowered his head to take a look. From the way the vegetation covered their surroundings, it seemed as if nobody had set foot here for at least a century. Xiang Shu used his sword to clear away a bunch of vines, and they found that, toward the center, all the rocks had crumbled. There had been a big battle in here.

"This is…a detonation of spiritual qi," Chen Xing said. "An exorcist blew something up here!"

"More apt to say they blew something *down*." Xiang Shu raised his head. There was another pile of collapsed rocks in front of him. The rocks weighed hundreds of pounds, but he heaved them aside, revealing the entrance to a karst cave. The darkness inside seemed to go on forever.

"Was it your mother and Zhang Liu?" Chen Xing wondered aloud. "Did they use this as an escape route when they were ambushed here all those years ago?"

Xiang Shu had no idea. So far, their conjecture about Xiang Yuyan's journey was just that—conjecture. But there was no doubt that an extraordinary battle had once taken place here. "Let's move forward into the cave and take a look."

The sky outside was approaching total darkness. Chen Xing wanted to summon the Heart Lamp, but Xiang Shu took his hand and led him through a path inside the cave, leaving no room for explanation. The cave was long, maybe several miles.

Xiang Shu glanced back at Chen Xing. “I can carry you on my back?”

“It’s fine,” Chen Xing insisted, though he was moved by the offer. He followed Xiang Shu, stepping where Xiang Shu stepped. They had done this to get through the cave back in the Yin Mountains, too.

Somewhere along the way, Chen Xing tripped. Xiang Shu stopped, and when he lowered his head, he saw that something was lying on the floor of the cave. It was an ancient wooden scabbard, nearly rotted through, with characters engraved on it.

Chen Xing tried to take a closer look, but Xiang Shu took the scabbard away and told him, “Keep moving forward.”

After an hour of walking, they finally reached the cave’s exit, where they were greeted with fresh, clear air and a sky full of stars. The cave, they discovered, passed under the Yangtze River and ended on the shore of Lake Hong. Under the starlight, they were able to read the line of Zhonggu seal script inscribed on the half-decayed scabbard.

“‘Acala Blade,’” Chen Xing murmured. “This was its original scabbard.” So Zhang Liu’s cold-formed steel scabbard had only been forged later. This one was the scabbard that Xiang Yuyan had carried when she left home with the sword!

Standing on the shore of Lake Hong, Xiang Shu looked at the scenery around them. Waves lapped against the shore of the lake. “This was indeed the path my mother and Zhang Liu took to escape,” he said.

“How about we investigate further after sunrise?” Chen Xing suggested. The night was dark now, and the lonely moon was rising over

the lake on the horizon, where the water and sky were one color. It illuminated a peninsula near the center of the lake, where a traditional Daoist house stood. The peninsula looked desolate and somber, with a strip of stone connecting it all the way to the shore.

Xiang Shu drew his bow and shot three consecutive arrows into the sky. They whistled as they flew, hurtling toward Xie An and the others.

“There’s only one way to proceed,” Xiang Shu said. “Go to the peninsula, then cross Lake Hong by raft to get to the other side. Let’s take a look.”

When they reached the end of the stone path, Chen Xing scrutinized the building. It looked like a place where diviners might have practiced—it was strange to see this type of ancient building sequestered in a place like this. The architecture was in the style of the Han period, so it must have been there for hundreds of years.

“Is anyone here?” Chen Xing asked, giving the door a light push. It opened with a creak, and somebody inside jumped up with a shout of surprise. Chen Xing had just been testing the waters—he hadn’t expected to actually find a person inside!

From outside, this structure didn’t look very big, but now that he was inside, he realized it was pretty spacious. The courtyard was full of flowers, and they had interrupted a middle-aged scholar who was watering them. The scholar smiled at them now. “Fellow brothers, how did you find this place?”

“We were passing by and happened upon it,” Xiang Shu said. “May we ask what this place is?”

The middle-aged scholar laughed. “It’s no easy feat to come here by simply happening upon it. Come, please sit. It must be destiny for our paths to have crossed. Would you two prefer tea or wine?”

Xiang Shu waved his hand. Curious, Chen Xing made his way into the courtyard and saw that the entire building was in perfect order. He shot Xiang Shu a tentative glance, and Xiang Shu nodded back at him, assuring Chen Xing that he would be cautious.

Numerous hermits lived in seclusion from the world during the Wei and Jin periods, with the most well-known ones having been Dao Qian and his group; Chen Xing didn’t find it too strange to meet a hermit here. He listened as the scholar introduced himself: family name Huan, personal name Mo. His family was a branch of the Huan family in Xuancheng; the same Huan family as the overambitious general Huan Wen. When all the Huans in Xuancheng had decided to move away to avoid trouble after the unrest Huan Wen caused, Huan Mo had been unwilling to leave the Jiangzuo region. Instead, he came to this house, which was called the Azure Wave’s Dwelling, and settled down.

“Azure Wave’s Dwelling,” Chen Xing repeated. “Do you know its origin?”

“According to legend,” said Huan Mo, who was now making tea for them in the open hall facing Lake Hong, “this place was built by an exorcist hundreds of years ago.” Chen Xing’s eyebrows rose, and Xiang Shu remained silent, frowning slightly. “Xiaoxiongdi, do you know what an exorcist is? Back in the Han period…”

Beneath the table, Xiang Shu tapped the back of Chen Xing’s hand lightly with his finger. Chen Xing nodded, understanding, and pretended to

be curious as he listened to Huan Mo's explanation. It sounded to Chen Xing like the rumors this scholar had heard about the Exorcism Department were pretty much accurate.

When Huan Mo had finished, Xiang Shu hummed thoughtfully and nodded.

Huan Mo had finished making the tea, so he served it to them and said, "Please enjoy, both of you. I bought this Junshan tea from the Chibi market recently."

Xiang Shu stared at the teacup, but made no move to drink from it. Chen Xing, on the other hand, happened to be thirsty, so he picked up his own teacup straight away.

Xiang Shu seemed to still be deep in thought when they suddenly heard Feng Qianjun's voice from outside.

"Is anybody here?"

The others had finally arrived. Huan Mo looked astonished, but he stood up and went to open the door. Xiang Shu immediately turned to Chen Xing.

"Don't just drink that," he said.

Chen Xing knew that Xiang Shu was a vigilant person; he had never allowed Chen Xing to eat or drink anything strangers had given him before.

"I'll let you test it first to see if there's any poison," said Chen Xing. Exasperated, Xiang Shu motioned for Chen Xing to watch as he took Chen Xing's teacup and had the first sip in Chen Xing's place. "Are *you* not afraid of being poisoned?"

Xiang Shu's response was a stony stare.

On the other side of the room, Huan Mo returned with Feng Qianjun, Xie An, Xiao Shan, Xie Daoyun, and Gu Qing in tow.

“Sure enough,” Feng Qianjun exclaimed when he saw Chen Xing, “you guys are here!”

Huan Mo was curious about their relationship, so Xie An told him, “We’re all schoolmates from the Imperial College, and we’re on a spring outing. We’ve been looking for these two youngsters for quite a while now.”

He smiled, and Huan Mo smiled back. “Are you also a student of the Imperial College?” Huan Mo asked.

“One is never too old to learn,” Xie An declared. “Diligent effort and the cultivation of achievements are essential to achieving clarity of mind.”

Huan Mo glanced at Xiao Shan, who was carrying some food. Xiao Shan turned to Chen Xing and said, “Hungry. Let’s eat, okay?”

“He’s a child prodigy in our Imperial College,” Xie An said quickly. “He was able to read and write essays at the age of five.”

Huan Mo really didn’t think that Xiao Shan looked like a scholar, but it would have been rude to probe. “I’m truly sorry. Please excuse my lack of manners.”

“We have really put you out, Huan-xiong,” said Feng Qianjun. “We were just planning to find a place to have dinner. Would you like to join us?”

“I’ve actually eaten already,” said Huan Mo. “There are some guest rooms upstairs. If it pleases you, honored guests, why not just stay here for the night? There will be a boat arriving tomorrow; I’ll have someone bring you to it when it does.”

Xie An wasted no time agreeing. He introduced himself as Xie Baiqiu, and just like that, the whole pack of them took over Huan Mo's home. They even started eating their dinner in Huan Mo's open hall like ill-mannered strays.

"Why is there a place like this on an island in the middle of Lake Hong?" Xiang Shu wondered. "It's odd."

Chen Xing agreed. "There are lots of people who choose to live in isolation, but this strikes me as strange too…" No matter how hard he tried, couldn't shake the sense that something was off.

For a while, Chen Xing, Xiang Shu, Xiao Shan, and Feng Qianjun all went on eating the refreshments Feng Qianjun had brought and actively ignoring the tea Huan Mo had offered them. Gu Qing and Xie Daoyun had disguised themselves as men, but they didn't take part in the meeting; they had retired upstairs to rest.

Chen Xing noticed Xiao Shan stretching. "Want me to take you upstairs to sleep?" he asked.

Xiao Shan nodded. "I want to sleep with you."

"All right." Chen Xing went upstairs to get the lay of the land, and he saw that Huan Mo had readied three rooms for them and laid out sleeping mats on the floors. Xie An and Feng Qianjun would share one room, and Chen Xing, Xiang Shu, and Xiao Shan would share another. The two girls were already in the last room.

Everyone dispersed, but Xiang Shu didn't go upstairs. He went and sat outside the hall with one leg crossed over the other as he faced the lake's tides. The decayed scabbard lay across his legs. Huan Mo walked through the corridor and saw him there, gazing out at Lake Hong, lost in thought.

“Are you not going to sleep?” he asked with a smile.

“Azure Wave’s Dwelling, huh?” Xiang Shu said evasively, his tone light. “The master of this place must be a person of refined taste.”

“I thought the same thing when I heard its name for the first time. People often compare life to a river, but in my view, life’s affairs are more akin to encounters with sudden storms. One day, you’ll be riding on the crest of a wave, feeling as free and unfettered as a mountain that juts miles into the sky. The next, you’re tossed into the crush, disoriented and drowning. For years, the deep blue sea has ebbed and flowed, but in truth, it’s all the routine rise and fall of the boundless ocean’s waves.”

“It sounds like Huan-xiansheng has experienced quite a lot in life,” Xiang Shu said politely.

“And that isn’t even the most difficult part,” Huan Mo went on. “The most difficult part is being submerged in the ocean and not being able to find your direction. You’ll be forced to drift along with the current, never knowing where you’re heading. It’s tough, especially when your surroundings are in total darkness. Even in the occasional moment of tranquility, there are dangers lurking under the surface of the sea. If you’re the slightest bit careless, you’ll be crushed to pieces, and even if you die without an intact corpse, you’ll still be swallowed by the sea. Your remains will still be swept along by the current—no escape, no end in sight. Does eternity not seem like a curse that we must suffer even after death?”

Xiang Shu stroked the scabbard with his broad palm as his deep eyes gazed out at Lake Hong in the darkness. “Xiansheng, when you look at the lake, does it look like nothing is there?”

“Yes, it’s pitch-black. It’s like a long and endless night.”

Xiang Shu raised his head a little, looking at the splendid galaxy reflected on the lake's surface. The Milky Way on the lake seemed connected with the one in the sky, forming a shining halo that went from heaven to earth and back to heaven.

"But when you're at sea, there is always something in the sky to guide you toward the direction of your sailing," Xiang Shu said, frowning slightly.

"You believe that what it shows you is your direction?" Huan Mo laughed. "That's nothing more than a fixation. When the dark clouds roll in, you'll lose your way once more."

"A fixation?"

"Youngsters must be wary of becoming fixated on any one thing. Obsession will ensnare you in the allure of temptation."

Xiang Shu disagreed. "People say one must not become too attached to anything, but I actually think the opposite is true. If a person had no attachments, they would take nothing to heart and be able to let go of everything, and their life would become incredibly dull."

Huan Mo seemed a little surprised by this. He nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm, it is as you say."

Xie An interrupted them then, having apparently emerged at some point. "Huan-xiong, would you like to drink some of my tea?"

Upstairs, Xiao Shan had fallen asleep, nestled warmly beneath the blankets. Chen Xing, on the other hand, felt a sudden urge to move around, so he slipped quietly out from under the covers and made his way

downstairs, where he heard Xie An chatting with Huan Mo over tea in the open hall.

Huan Mo was off to one side, boiling the water. “Then I shall not be courteous,” he was saying, a smile in his voice.

Chen Xing passed through the back of the hall as Xie An replied, “It’s actually been a long time since I’ve heard anything about any members of the Huan family. After Huan Wen lost his power, the entire clan seemed to vanish from the face of the earth. Which master did you study under in Xuancheng?”

Back in the day, Huan Wen had been an unparalleled marshal who led the Jin troops in expeditions to retake the northern area; he was a formidable adversary of the Murong, Fu, and Yao families. Unfortunately, his achievements made him arrogant. Upon his return to the court, he acted like he intended to depose the current ruler and instate a new one, and he even commanded the court to confer the nine bestowments on him.[9] In the end, he fell into Xie An’s clutches, though Xie An never opposed him outright and only ever used one strategy—dragging things out as long as he could. He made successful use of this strategy until Huan Wen’s soul returned to the heavens, at which point everyone in the Jin court breathed a sigh of relief.

It was because of Huan Wen that the Sima family had become so paranoid about powerful officials. They feared that officials who amassed enough military power would move against the emperor. This was why the three sides—the imperial court, the Beifu Army, and the imperial family—now hung in such an awkward balance.

Huan Mo spoke a little of Xuancheng before the conversation turned to the longtime friendship between Huan Wen and Wang Meng. When Chen Xing heard that they were speaking of his shixiong, he listened closer. He had the sense that Xie An was trying to subtly dig some information out of Huan Mo. Before long, though, the subject changed again, and Xie An and Huan Mo began to discuss philosophies of knowledge on landscapes. Chen Xing stopped listening and left the hall.

He walked outside and, in the depths of the garden, found the stone tower that he had seen from outside of the Azure Wave's Dwelling. Xiang Shu was standing at the base of the stone tower, and when he heard the sound of footsteps, he looked over at Chen Xing.

"I was just thinking I couldn't find you anywhere," Chen Xing said. "So this is where you ran off to."

"You started to look all over the place the moment you didn't have your protector in sight? You're just like Xiao Shan."

"I was afraid that you'd run off and get lost!"

"I was just taking a walk around the place. I noticed that there's something off about the stone tower here."

"Yes," Chen Xing said, frowning. "Karakorum has one too. Do you remember? That one had a defensive formation around it, but it was locked anyway."

"Why do I get the feeling that this stone tower *is* the one in Karakorum?" said Xiang Shu.

"No, the one there didn't have this keyhole." Chen Xing touched the center of the stone tower, where a hollowed-out black keyhole was waiting

for its key. A thought occurred to him then—could the Azure Wave's Dwelling be another site that had been passed down by the Xiang family?

Xiang Shu motioned for Chen Xing to step back, then leaned closer, peering intently through the dark keyhole. The sight struck Chen Xing as funny.

"You won't be able to see anything." Chen Xing told him. "Otherwise there'd be no reason to lock it up."

"There's wind," Xiang Shu murmured. He pressed his ear against the stone door, straining to hear.

Wind? Chen Xing copied Xiang Shu and put his ear to the door to listen. This left them face to face, their ears pressed against the stone. Xiang Shu's warm, moist lips were less than an inch from his own, and when they exhaled, their breaths mingled. They probably looked like they were about to kiss.

Stiffly, Chen Xing moved away from the stone door, and Xiang Shu cleared his throat, then pulled away too. Apparently thinking of something, he raised his sword toward the door.

"Are the dimensions right?" Chen Xing asked. By way of response, Xiang Shu slowly inserted the Acala Blade into the keyhole. Chen Xing blinked; it was a perfect fit.

"I already tried once before," Xiang Shu explained. "Nothing happened."

"No, no, no…" Chen Xing's breathing almost stopped. He raised his hand and put it over Xiang Shu's, on the sword. "Just this once, Xiang Shu, listen to me."

He activated the Heart Lamp. Light erupted, blinding, flooding both of their bodies. In an instant, the entire garden was illuminated as if by the midday sun.

Just as he was about to bring the Heart Lamp to its full power, Chen Xing hesitated, leaving Xiang Shu confused for a moment. “Wait,” he said. “Should we call everyone else out?”

“No. Let’s open it and take a look first.”

Chen Xing took a deep breath. “But after I open it, I may not necessarily be able to lock it again…”

“I’ll take care of it. Just open it!”

Chen Xing injected the Heart Lamp’s light into the sword. For a moment, they both shone brilliantly. As the Heart Lamp’s mana poured from the Sword of Wisdom into the stone tower, the golden characters on the door glowed, creating a dazzling magical formation. Then, with a buzzing sound that resonated through the courtyard, the ground lit up.

“The writings of the General of the Right Army, Wang—”

Back in the open hall, Huan Mo cut himself off, a strange smile appearing on his face. Xie An watched him, and an equally strange smile came over him too, crinkling his eyes.

“What are you smiling for?” Huan Mo asked, suddenly wary.

“What are *you* smiling for?”

Huan Mo sneered and laid a gentle hand on the table. In the next instant, the four walls of the Azure Wave’s Dwelling broke apart like shredded paper and floated away. The wooden rafters collapsed soundlessly,

and the roof vanished, revealing the starry sky overhead. Xie An's brows twitched as he watched Huan Mo with an enigmatic expression.

"Xie Anshi," Huan Mo said, "I really must thank you all for helping me open the locked spirit tower and retrieve…" But as he spoke, his confident tone changed. His expression froze in place.

"Don't celebrate too early, Huan-xiansheng," Xie An said in a low voice. "Didn't you notice anything odd about the taste of the tea you just drank?"

In the courtyard, Xiang Shu and Chen Xing were still grasping the hilt of the Acala Blade together.

"Open!" Chen Xing shouted.

Each layer of the tower crashed away, the stones of its walls tumbling outward. Next came a sudden gust of wind. Xiang Shu backed up, raising an arm in front of Chen Xing, using his body as a shield to protect his exorcist. Chen Xing's eyes widened when he glimpsed what was inside the tower—a golden pearl glowing with a diffuse light.

As they watched, an intense brilliance burst out of the pearl and swept across the lake. The remainder of the Azure Wave's Dwelling broke apart as the illusion dissipated, revealing a deserted island covered in nothing but jungle. Xiao Shan abruptly fell from where he was sleeping in midair. He woke with a shout, turned in the air, flipped, and landed with both feet and one hand on the ground.

Feng Qianjun was dangling from a tree. "What on earth is that flashing?!" he exclaimed. "Qing-er! Qing-er!"

Gu Qing was shouting back to him from somewhere. Xie Daoyun cried, “Be careful!” It seemed that the two of them had also fallen down from a tree.

“Wait for me!” shouted Feng Qianjun.

Huan Mo’s eyes glazed over. He pressed one hand against his forehead, his legs buckling under him as he collapsed to the floor. The illusion was gone, and Xie An, now looking down at Huan Mo, found himself at a loss for what to do next.

“Xiaoshidi!” he cried. “I seem to have captured a yao! Come here and take a look!”

As he watched, black qi began to curl out from Huan Mo’s body, slowly amassing into a physical form. From within it came a hoarse voice. “Xie Anshi…just this once, I actually fell into your clutches. You can die peacefully now…”

Xie An was utterly unafraid. “What kind of evil are you?!” he bellowed, pulling out his sword. “Is this your original form?”

The black qi let out a crazed laugh. “Don’t you recognize me?” it said in an impudent tone. “I thought you’d all been searching for me all this time.”

“Shi…Shi Hai?!”

Just like that, Xie An had completed the first yao capture of his career as an exorcist and taken down the enemy camp’s most formidable foe in one fell swoop. It was enough to make his name go down in history! For his next move, Xie An made a wise decision—pull away and run!

“Chen Xing!” Xie An shouted. “Protector! Shi Hai’s here!”

Swish! The mass of black qi let out a hoarse, wild roar and surged at Xie An.

The stone tower yawned wide. The light from the pearl within was so bright it was almost blinding. But before Chen Xing could go in to retrieve the pearl, a silent shadow in the darkness drew a sword and swung it at the back of his neck.

Luckily, Xiang Shu was faster; he raised his arm, caught the blade of the sword—and managed to snap it with his bare hand. Blood spurted everywhere, and the air crackled around them as the sword broke into two halves under Xiang Shu’s might. Chen Xing spun around and came face to face with his assailant.

Sima Wei!

Sima Wei wasn’t wearing a helmet. He raised his broken sword and swung again at the nape of Chen Xing’s neck. With a hand on Chen Xing’s shoulder, Xiang Shu pushed himself into the air, where he spun, spread his legs, and locked his ankles around Sima Wei’s neck. He used his momentum to spin Sima Wei along with him and slam him into the ground.

“Get the artifact!” Xiang Shu shouted.

Chen Xing didn’t need to be told twice. He took two quick strides up the platform and leaped up to grab the pearl in his hand. Without the mana supporting it, the tower came crashing down.

Xiang Shu twisted Sima Wei until he rolled over on the ground, then turned around and leaped to catch the Acala Blade. Slowly, Sima Wei

staggered to his feet. He straightened his twisted neck and lunged at Xiang Shu barehanded.

“People like you,” Xiang Shu spat, sword in hand, dodging gracefully and leaving Sima Wei to charge at empty air, “I can fight eight of you at once.”

He swung his sword back; with a muffled crunch, Sima Wei’s chest plate buckled inward. Sima Wei reeled back under the force of the impact, slamming against a large tree and collapsing violently into the ruins.

Xiang Shu strode forward once more, sword in hand. “Last time,” he said, “three of you came at me together.”

Staring at Xiang Shu, Chen Xing rose to his feet. He cut a sorry figure.

Sima Wei, who had just managed to scramble from the ground, instinctively raised an arm to deflect the blow. An instant later, he suffered a second blow from Xiang Shu’s sword.

“Is it still not clear to you how this will end? Have you still not given up? You still want to ambush us?!” Xiang Shu lifted Sima Wei up on his sword. With a horizontal sweep, he sent Sima Wei flying fifty feet away, screaming as he went.

“Stop fighting!” Chen Xing shouted. “Show some mercy! That’s enough!”

“Normally I wouldn’t care to fight any of you, but…” Before Sima Wei could recover, Xiang Shu launched himself into the air with an almost effortless leap. As he spun in the air, Sima Wei swung his broken sword, but Xiang Shu snapped his opponent’s arm as if it were a mere strip of bamboo.

The rage in Xiang Shu's chest finally exploded, and he roared, "You rotten bastard! Begone!"

Sima Wei narrowly escaped being split in two under Xiang Shu's next strike, which sent his body flying into Lake Hong like a rock from a slingshot. He hit the water with a deafening explosion.

Xiang Shu sheathed his sword. For a moment, Chen Xing forgot about the Dinghai Pearl, overcome by a profound, inarticulable sense of admiration. But he was distracted from that feeling by the sight of Xie An running over in a panic, his robes flapping as if he were riding the wind.

"Xiaoshidi! I just caught Shi Hai—"

Xie An was interrupted by a cloud of black qi, its shape gradually becoming clearer as it morphed into a human silhouette. Chen Xing clutched the pearl in his hand while Xiang Shu readied his sword, wielding it horizontally and moving to stand protectively in front of Chen Xing.

"Ah, the Dinghai Pearl!" came a voice from within the mass of black qi. "It has taken me three hundred years to find it, a whole three hundred years."

As Xie An slowly retreated to Chen Xing's side, Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan, who had just rescued Gu Qing and Xie Daoyun, rushed over. They all pulled out their weapons and faced the black shadow.

"Shi Hai?!" Chen Xing cried. That cloud of dark qi was the human figure he had seen above the earth veins in Kuaiji. Chen Xing had often imagined the day he'd encounter Shi Hai face to face, but he'd never imagined anything like this!

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“ONE, TWO, three, four, five… Five,” Shi Hai said slowly. “Come. You’ve destroyed five of my drought fiend kings; five exorcists will make a good replacement. You can help me guard my Ten Thousand Spirits Array.”

With that, Shi Hai transformed into a whirlwind of blackness that surged toward all seven of them with tremendous force. Those with weapons raised them, ready to defend, including Xiang Shu with his sword. Chen Xing’s mind raced as he calculated the danger. He stepped forward.

Shi Hai conjured a sudden gust of chilling wind. Within the black mist, his humanlike figure swept past Xiang Shu to plunge into Xie Daoyun. But Chen Xing moved quickly—he formed the Heart Lamp seal with his hands and slammed it against Xie Daoyun’s back just as Shi Hai’s darkness began to seep into her body. Chen Xing flooded Xie Daoyun’s meridians with the Heart Lamp, and Shi Hai let out a deafening wail as its light chased him back out.

“Heh.” Chen Xing smirked. “Want to try again?” He only had one move with the Heart Lamp, but it was the perfect counter to this formless entity.

The others attacked with their weapons, but all their strikes could do was disperse the black mist; Shi Hai was unscathed. The darkness whirled and rose with the wind, then lunged at Xie An.

“Hey, hey!” Xie An shouted. Shi Hai tried to possess him next, but Chen Xing grabbed his wrist and infused him with the power of the Heart

Lamp, once again forcing Shi Hai out.

Realizing that he couldn't gain the upper hand, Shi Hai reluctantly withdrew to hover above them, casting a piercing glare down at Chen Xing. Meanwhile, thinking hard, Chen Xing began channeling the power of the Heart Lamp into his hands again. He was ready to unleash his full strength —even if it meant spitting blood and falling unconscious—to land a devastating blow.

But Xiang Shu took a step back. "We've already secured the Dinghai Pearl," he said. "Don't waste time fighting him. Let's go!"

Chen Xing jolted to attention, tightening his grip on the Dinghai Pearl.

Shi Hai sneered. "Do you really think it'll be that easy? Did you honestly imagine I'd wait here for you without any tricks up my sleeve?"

Behind him, the waters of Lake Hong roared to life. As they all looked on, the surface exploded with a surge of vengeful energy, and a decaying jiao shot into the sky, carrying Sima Wei. It was the demonic jiao that had escaped from Kuaiji months earlier!

"Stay where you are!" Shi Hai shouted from where he was hovering even higher above the ground. "Stop this futile struggle. Come with me, and I'll spare the lives of those two mortals behind you!"

Sima Wei twisted his dislocated wrist and ribs back into place, then steered the decaying jiao into a dive toward the ground. Shi Hai's misty form leaped onto the jiao's head.

"Scatter!" Xiang Shu bellowed.

The group split instantly and ran in different directions, Feng Qianjun carrying Gu Qing, Xiao Shan grabbing Xie Daoyun, and Xiang Shu

scooping up Chen Xing. Scrambling on all fours, Xie An tumbled into a nearby thicket to retrieve the unconscious scholar, Huan Mo. “What now?!” he shouted.

“I don’t know!” Chen Xing gasped, struggling to keep his footing on the muddy ground. The demonic jiao unleashed a cloud of poisonous mist, and Xiang Shu covered Chen Xing’s mouth and nose.

“Don’t breathe!” he yelled. “Run!”

“Leaving so soon?” Shi Hai sneered. “Shulü Kong, Chen Xing, I had hoped for a proper fight tonight. Well, no matter. Go ahead and run. With the night’s entertainment cut short, I suppose I’ll pay a visit to the villages by the lake instead. Xin Yuanping needs to eat, after all!”

“Return to Chibi and rally the troops to take it down!” yelled Feng Qianjun. If they retreated now, the rotting jiao would wreak a massacre on the unprepared county of Chibi. Countless civilians would die violently, and the area’s resentment would only intensify.

Hiding among the trees on the island, Chen Xing clutched Xiang Shu’s hand tightly and whispered, “I’ll activate the Heart Lamp. Finish him in one blow.”

“No!” Xiang Shu said, rejecting the idea without a second thought.

“That’s Shi Hai! If we kill him, it’s all over, for good!”

“Think of a way to use the Dinghai Pearl.” Xiang Shu gestured at the precious orb in Chen Xing’s hand. “I’ll buy us some time.”

“Wait—”

Chen Xing reached out to stop him, but Xiang Shu had already leaped into the trees.

A sharp whistle pierced the night. Not far away, Xiao Shan returned the signal with a whistle of his own and climbed swiftly into the trees.

“Hi-yah!” Xiao Shan’s youthful voice sliced through the night sky like a blade—and then he turned into a shadow, soaring through the air. Xiang Shu was close behind him, and he held his sword out flat and braced it with immense strength to propel Xiao Shan forward. With one powerful step, Xiao Shan soared more than thirty feet, carving a graceful arc with his claws outstretched to deliver a phenomenal strike.

Shi Hai, who was riding the demonic jiao as it circled in the air, was caught off guard by this display of physical prowess from a mere mortal. He tried to fly higher and get out of range of the attack, but he was too late: Xiao Shan had already hooked onto the jiao’s head and flung a rope back down to the ground below.

Sima Wei flipped downward and lunged at Xiao Shan with his sword. Down below, Xiang Shu raised his hand. Before the ends of the rope could slip out of his hand, he grabbed onto it with a quick flick of his wrist and was swiftly pulled up into the air.

“Find somewhere to hide!” Feng Qianjun called to Gu Qing. Then he sheathed his dual sabers, dashed forward, grabbed the rope’s tail, and shot into the sky with Xiang Shu.

Chen Xing ran out of the woods and into a clearing, where Xie An rushed forward alongside a sword-wielding Xie Daoyun.

“Xiaoshidi, what should we do?” asked Xie An. “Is this the Dinghai Pearl?”

“Run!” Chen Xing urged them. “Don’t worry about it! Run to the shore! Hurry!”

The demonic jiao soared into the sky, carrying Xiang Shu, Xiao Shan, and Feng Qianjun with it. Their figures were soon indistinguishable in the night. Chen Xing knew that he had to deal with the Dinghai Pearl immediately, but how was he supposed to use it? No scroll had ever recorded the method for activating this artifact. Zhang Liu was the only one who had ever gotten his hands on it. Why had Zhang Liu left the Dinghai Pearl here?

Never mind—Chen Xing had no time to think about that now. The first thing to try was to activate the pearl like he would with any other magical artifact.

The moment the Heart Lamp's energy infused the pearl, the air around Chen Xing stirred as if a massive storm had been unleashed. Fierce winds uprooted the surrounding trees, and Chen Xing found himself standing in the eye of a violent cyclone. Xie An shielded himself hastily and led Xie Daoyun and Gu Qing away from the center of the island.

"To attain this much power with a mortal body," Shi Hai said coldly, "is no mean feat…"

Sima Wei was locked in combat with Xiao Shan as Xiang Shu pulled himself up the rope and leaped into the air. In the split second he spun in midair, he unsheathed his heavy sword, and he landed on the jiao's head to swing the sword at Sima Wei.

An eerie laugh came from the cloud of black mist atop the jiao's head, and the demonic jiao suddenly twisted around and dove toward the ground. Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan shouted in unison as the jiao plummeted toward the earth in a thousand-foot drop. Even Xiang Shu

struggled to endure the sudden acceleration and sharp descent; it felt as though his heart was about to burst from his chest.

In the next instant, the demonic jiao crashed violently into the surface of Lake Hong.

Chen Xing was struggling to control the Dinghai Pearl. The spiritual energy inside it was surging wildly, and he had no idea how to stabilize it. The cyclone was growing stronger with each passing moment, but the Dinghai Pearl wasn't drawing on Chen Xing's Heart Lamp power. It just kept spinning, releasing the immense spiritual energy contained within at an uncontrollable rate.

"Damn it!" Chen Xing shouted into the air. "I can't control it much longer! Xiang Shu!"

Instead of a response, there was a massive crash. The demonic jiao had plummeted from an altitude of over a thousand feet and smashed into the surface of Lake Hong; no one heard Chen Xing's shout, and Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun had been knocked unconscious by the impact. Tsunami-like waves surged in all directions.

Underwater, Xiang Shu kicked hard to propel himself and his sword to the surface. The demonic jiao ignored Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan's limp forms and instead swam straight for Xiang Shu. It lashed out at him and sent him spinning through the water in a flurry of bubbles.

"A strong swimmer," Shi Hai said, his low voice echoing in the water. "Did you get that from your father?"

Resentment filled the air, turning the lake water inky black. Still on the shore, Chen Xing exerted all his strength to stabilize the Dinghai Pearl.

“Will it work?” Xie An shouted, running over to him.

“Run!” Chen Xing shouted back. “Run now! This artifact is going to explode!”

Feeling the terrifying force inside the pearl, Chen Xing was seriously regretting his actions. Who on earth suggested releasing the Dinghai Pearl’s power here? It was going to flatten everything in a thirty-mile radius!

Nearby, Gu Qing saw Feng Qianjun bobbing up and down on the surface of the lake. “Feng-dage!” she cried. She didn’t care about anything else. Without hesitation, she leaped into Lake Hong.

In the same moment, Xiang Shu appeared on the surface of the lake, and Chen Xing’s eyes went wide. The demonic jiao had bitten into Xiang Shu’s shoulder, and his blood spurted as he was dragged out of the lake, still struggling against the monster. The blood spread across the lake’s surface. Xiang Shu struck out with his sword, but he missed; the jiao coiled around him and dragged him back down into the lake’s depths.

Chen Xing’s blood went cold. He gritted his teeth, let out a loud shout—and then, his eyes turning red, he channeled all his energy into the Dinghai Pearl.

Stirred by the waves, Feng Qianjun woke up in Gu Qing’s grasp. He surfaced, gasping for air, and then pushed Gu Qing away. “Go back! Run!” he shouted, before diving back into Lake Hong.

The water was now incredibly murky. Xiao Shan swung his claws, pulling the resentment from the demonic jiao. Then, with a mighty swipe, he uprooted countless tangled plants from the lakebed. Feng Qianjun fell straight to the bottom, both blades drawn, resentment swirling around them,

and thousands of lotus roots, water weeds, and other aquatic plants shot out like tentacles to bind the jiao tightly.

Xiang Shu was finally able to break free. He flipped in the water and struck down at the jiao's head, and in an instant, the black mist around the jiao's head congealed into the body of Shi Hai.

Xiang Shu's eyes widened, and he expelled a stream of bubbles from his mouth. It was Wang Ziye! Xiang Shu slashed down with his sword with all his strength, forcing Wang Ziye to finally reveal his true form. His face twisted into a strange smile, and he transformed again, becoming a masked man.

"Kjera!" Xiang Shu bellowed in the water.

Wang Ziye raised a hand and pointed at Xiang Shu. "Fear and unease, anger and madness, they all live within you." Resentment erupted and surged through the lake's depths like a tidal wave. "Do you know what causes your pain? Come with me. My lord will give you the answers you so desperately seek…"

The resentment grew thicker, snaking around Xiang Shu's entire body and the Acala Blade in his hand. A wisp of black mist entered his forehead, and then the resentment, like so many tentacles, dragged him toward the shadows.

But then a flash of white light shone from within Xiang Shu's chest. Chen Xing descended into the dark waters, his right hand blazing with intense light and his left holding the Dinghai Pearl. His robes fluttered in the currents, looking like nothing so much as the first rays of sunlight piercing through the night sky from high above the lake.

When the Dinghai Pearl hit the water, the currents in the lake churned violently, and a force like a hurricane spread out to both sides like a pair of wings unfurling from Chen Xing's back. With a deafening roar, the waters of Lake Hong blasted into the sky.

Chen Xing's voice thundered in Xiang Shu's ear. "Exorcise!"

Clarity returned to Xiang Shu like a bolt from the blue, and the resentment that had ensnared him disintegrated under the Heart Lamp's light. With his sword glowing with immense power, Xiang Shu twisted his body, shot forward, and struck at Wang Ziye.

The waters of Lake Hong erupted. From the outside, it looked as though a million blazing suns had gathered within the lake and then surged wildly toward the shore. Water blasted up into the sky with enough force to collapse mountains, and then crashed back down. Amidst it all, Xiang Shu shot out of the lake in a streak of golden light, clad in gilded armor and carrying Chen Xing in his arms.

The demonic jiao let out a roar of fury as the hurricane stirred up by the Dinghai Pearl violently swept it away. Shi Hai screamed in outrage and transformed into a meteor that spiraled across the surface of the lake, trailing black fire as it went. Xiang Shu drew his longbow, nocked a radiant arrow, and muttered, "Kjera, it's over."

In the lake, Gu Qing clutched a broken log, gasping for air and struggling to keep her head above water. As Xiang Shu landed and set Chen Xing on the shore, Shi Hai noticed Gu Qing, and he turned, heading straight for her.

"Qing-er!" shouted Xie Daoyun. Feng Qianjun had just crawled to the shore in a wretched state, and his eyes went wide with shock.

Black energy enveloped Gu Qing, and her face twisted into a sinister grin. She flew out of the water to land atop the demonic jiao's head. Xiang Shu instinctively lowered his bow, but Gu Qing sneered at him. "Think carefully, Shulü Kong. We will meet again someday."

With that, the demonic jiao turned, shot across the surface of the water toward the nearby Yangtze River, and plunged into the river's depths.

The Dinghai Pearl fell to the ground with a sharp clang. Chen Xing swayed unsteadily, clutching Xiang Shu's sleeve, the world around him blurring in and out of focus. Xiang Shu immediately dropped to one knee and embraced Chen Xing, cradling him against his shoulder.

"Xing-er!"

"I…I'm fine," Chen Xing gasped. "The…Dinghai Pearl…"

Xiao Shan swam to the shore. "Chen Xing!"

The lake's waves surged again and ejected a writhing, pitch-black corpse onto the shore. Xiang Shu turned to see Sima Wei struggling to push himself to his feet.

Three days later, Xiang Shu walked briskly into Jiankang's Taichu Palace. All the officials rose to greet him, and Sima Yao breezily gestured for him to sit.

"We've arranged everything as per your instructions," Xie Xuan said. "We've positioned ships at the mouth of the Yangtze River and set up iron chains at the river's bottom. Any movement in the water will be detected immediately."

“We’ve also dispatched soldiers to monitor the waterways in Jiangnan and Jiangdong, as well as the canals that connect different villages and towns,” added Xie Shi. Xiang Shu nodded.

“How is Chen-xiansheng’s health?” asked Sima Yao.

“He’s improving, but he still needs to rest,” said Xiang Shu. “You must all be particularly cautious right now. We have confirmed that Wang Ziye was Shi Hai’s cover identity. Any northern armies that march south are sure to be followed by the drought fiend army.”

“You are correct, Martial God,” Sima Yao said evenly. “Starting today, We intend to send out messengers to all regions—Qin, Shu, Jin, and the north. Whether allies or enemies, all will be notified.”

Xie An said, “The war in the Central Plains will drag on for a long time, but from the leaders of the various tribes to the common people, everyone understands what needs to be done—and what must not be done. Even if Wang Ziye intends to use the undead, it’s unlikely that the tribes will stand by and let him.”

Xiang Shu frowned and surveyed the officials around him.

Chapter 72

IN A SET of sleeping chambers in Taichu Palace, Chen Xing was lost in thought, staring irritably at the magical artifact he'd salvaged from the banks of Lake Hong. The Dinghai Pearl rested on a soft cloth atop a table, and inside it, a dim trace of brilliance, in the form of a dragon, swirled around slowly. When no mana was being channeled into it, the Dinghai Pearl kept its azure color, but when Chen Xing funneled in the power of the Heart Lamp, it had turned golden.

After they returned from Chibi, Xiang Shu had taken Xie An's advice and brought Chen Xing to the palace with him. It was a critical moment for all of them, and at this point, there was no safer place in the world for them to stay than Jiankang's Taichu Palace. If not even the full power of Sima Yao's dynasty could protect this artifact, then the Revival of All Magic was even further out of reach than they thought. Shi Hai was now possessing Gu Qing, and there had been no further news of him since he rode the demonic jiao into the Yangtze. As far as anyone could tell, he had no immediate plans for tracking down the Dinghai Pearl again.

Chen Xing had the other five artifacts laid out on the table with the Dinghai Pearl—the Yin Yang Mirror, the Zheng Drum, the Soulfall Bell, the Four-Colored Seal Rings, and the Acala Blade. He tried again to activate the artifacts through the Dinghai Pearl, but to no avail.

They had been lucky that Xie An had a concentrated sleeping drug with him on the night they met Shi Hai. Xie An, who wanted wholeheartedly to a useful member of the exorcist team but lacked any of the relevant skills, had brought it along to at least make sure they all got a

good night's sleep. As fate would have it, he'd used it to knock out Shi Hai, their greatest enemy, on the night of their first encounter, thereby carving out a space for himself in history.

Once again, Chen Xing thought back to the moment when Huan Mo collapsed. *"The Dinghai Pearl!"* Shi Hai had said. *"It has taken me three hundred years to find it, a whole three hundred years."* So the pearl that lay before Chen Xing now was definitely the thing that Shi Hai wanted. In Xiang Yuyan's memories, the Dinghai Pearl had glowed when Zhang Liu offered it up. While the exorcists hadn't been able to see it clearly in those memories, it stood to reason that Shi Hai must have seen it before.

But why would Zhang Liu have hidden the Dinghai Pearl on that tiny island? Something didn't add up.

He was mulling it over when Xiang Shu finally came in. Xiang Shu stopped in front of the table, sat down cross-legged, and put his hands on his knees.

"How is it?" he asked.

The tangled ball of frustrated emotions in Chen Xing's heart unraveled and smoothed out. Xiang Shu's presence had that effect on him lately. "Where are Xiao Shan and the others?"

"Feng Qianjun, Xie Daoyun, and Xiao Shan all went to search for Gu Qing. You were sound asleep when they left. Xiao Shan wanted to hang around until you woke up, but I told him not to wait."

So the Exorcism Department had split up to carry out its goals. Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun went to track down the demonic jiao, leaving Xie An, Chen Xing, and Xiang Shu behind to keep watch. Really, Chen Xing should have gone with them; how could he not, when Gu Qing's life was at

risk? But he needed to focus on the most important issue: how to end the Silence of All Magic.

Xie An arrived then too, joining them at the table and sitting down to stare at the Dinghai Pearl.

“We’ve finally found the thing that we were searching for,” Chen Xing said. “Now I just need to figure out how to release the mana stored inside it and return the world to how it was.”

“Are you sure this is it?” Xiang Shu asked. Just that question, nothing else. It was the same question that had been nagging at Chen Xing. With one long, slender finger, Xiang Shu gave the pearl a gentle flick, making it spin around on the table.

“I’m sure.” Chen Xing used his own finger to stop the artifact, then raised his eyes to meet Xiang Shu’s. “I think?”

The fallout from using the Heart Lamp hadn’t been like before, when he fell into a coma for three months; this time, he slept for only a day before waking. When Chen Xing landed in the water, he’d felt a powerful burst of mana from the pearl as it effortlessly bolstered the Heart Lamp. What else could this thing be but the Dinghai Pearl that contained all the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth?

“I remember it very clearly, Martial God,” Xie An put in. “The first thing Shi Hai said was ‘Xie Anshi, I really must thank you all for helping me open the locked spirit tower and retrieve…’ And then the part that you all heard was the second half.”

“Yes,” Chen Xing agreed. “Now that you mention it, that was how it went. There’s no doubt about that.”

Xiang Shu crossed his arms, sinking into a deep silence. “Xie An,” he asked at last, “where is that drought fiend king?”

“Detained in the prison,” Xie An replied. “There are a number of guards stationed around him, vigilant for any sign that he might try to escape. His Majesty has also ordered that he be allowed to listen in when you question the prisoner.”

“Tonight, then.”

Xie An nodded and got up to take his leave, leaving Chen Xing and Xiang Shu sitting at opposite ends of the table. Chen Xing used his finger to play around with the Dinghai Pearl. He gave it a gentle push, and it rolled through the middle of the row of artifacts toward Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu gave the Dinghai Pearl a little push of his own, his gaze never leaving Chen Xing’s face, and it rolled on back and came to a stop in front of Chen Xing. They rolled the pearl back and forth between them a few more times like two children playing a game.

“You…seem to be in a pretty good mood today,” Chen Xing said, watching Xiang Shu’s expression carefully.

Xiang Shu raised his eyebrows. “You want to break the pearl?”

“The spiritual qi inside is tempestuous, and breaking it open could easily level all of Jiankang, but let’s set aside the question of what happens when it breaks for now. Assume that we can find a place that’s completely devoid of people. What would we even use to break it?”

“The Acala Blade?”

Chen Xing thought about this, then said, a little hesitantly, “The divine weapon of Acala against a dragon pearl that has existed since the earth split from the sky… What are the chances of the blade winning?”

“The Sky-Rending Claws?” Xiang Shu suggested. “Or the Saber of Harmony and Life?”

“The Sky-Rending Claws were made from Zhuyin’s dragon claws, so compared to the internal soul of a dragon that has formed over time, it’s one level too weak. The Saber of Harmony and Life contains the power of the green woods, and legend has it that it was created by the Forest God Gou Mang, but compared to the godly dragon who created the world…it’s not enough.”

Xiang Shu opened his hand slightly. “The distance to success is only a step.”

Chen Xing thought for a long time. “This artifact isn’t mentioned in any historical records. The best thing to do would be to find the method that Zhang Liu used to take in the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth and reverse that process to release the mana.”

“On the bank of the lake, you were very close to succeeding.”

“And I also almost blew myself up in the process,” Chen Xing reminded him. “Speaking of which, that was strange. It only worked that one time. See? Now it’s completely still.”

Chen Xing tried to pour his mana into the Dinghai Pearl like he had when he cast magic in the Azure Wave’s Dwelling, but the Heart Lamp’s light merely passed through the body of the pearl. He couldn’t activate it again.

Xiang Shu frowned. “How are you feeling right now?”

“I’m fine. Using up this little bit of energy is nothing,” Chen Xing said. “Oh, what to do?” He had considered a hundred options, but none of them solved the problem, and his head was beginning to hurt again.

They sat like that, facing the Dinghai Pearl, for the entire afternoon. At nightfall, after they ate dinner, Xiang Shu took the Dinghai Pearl and stashed it away on his person. “I’ll take care of it for now,” he said. “When you need it, come find me.”

Chen Xing began to smile. They didn’t have a solution to this difficult problem, but his mood was starting to improve. They were, at least, close to achieving the last goal on their journey. “Why are you so nervous about it?” he asked, but Xiang Shu was already out the door, whistling as he went. “Wait! Where are you going?”

He got up and followed Xiang Shu, only then remembering that Sima Wei’s interrogation was slated for that night. The thought made him uneasy. That the ancestors of the Jin dynasty’s Sima family had been revived and turned into Shi Hai’s attack dogs was no trivial matter. Sima Yao had forbidden all talk of it, and from the moment the exorcists brought Sima Wei’s broken corpse back from the banks of Lake Hong, Sima Wei had been confined in the underground prison.

As the twilight deepened, servants cleared out an empty space within a hall of the palace for the interrogation. The hall was filled with a heavy complement of guards keeping watch, all of them on high alert for any spying crows. Chen Xing and Xiang Shu took their seats, and Sima Yao hid himself behind the folding screen. Xie An led the guards escorting Sima Wei into the hall.

There he was, the last of the six princes Shi Hai had reanimated. Sima Wei’s entire body was broken and beaten, and metal chains restrained his every limb. His hair hung loose and wild, and the skin on his face was the dark blue-gray of a corpse. His upper body was immobilized by an iron yoke.

“My first thought was to cast him in hot metal,” Xie An said, “but we don’t know how drought fiends stay alive, so this was the solution we came up with for now.”

“It’s good enough,” Chen Xing confirmed. “As long as he can’t move, it works. Once he’s rid of Shi Hai’s resentment, he won’t be as powerful.” The drought fiend kings were all bolstered by the resentment in their bodies, and the stronger the resentment, the more powerful the drought fiend king. It was a bit like the way the Heart Lamp affected Xiang Shu’s power.

Chen Xing studied Sima Wei, who lifted his head slightly and turned two dull, murky eyes toward him. But he didn’t say “save me” or anything like that.

Xiang Shu broke the silence. “Do you recognize this thing?” he asked Sima Wei, pulling out the Dinghai Pearl.

Sima Wei turned his head toward it and studied it. “I do not know what that is.”

“Do you still remember what you said to me that day in Pyongyang?” Chen Xing asked.

“What words?” Sima Wei asked. “Will you save me?”

“That depends on your performance,” Xie An said. “You were once a ruler of our Great Jin, a brave spirit of the departed ancestors, yet you didn’t protect your descendants. In fact, you slaughtered them, playing your master’s dog. When you reach the underworld, what right will you have to greet my Great Jin’s Emperor Wu with your head held high?!”

The corners of Sima Wei’s mouth turned down scornfully, as if Xie An and his words weren’t worth his time. Frowning, Chen Xing looked

Sima Wei over. His features were well-formed, his physique august. Even if there hadn't been any great changes in the world after his death, Sima Wei had been only twenty when he died. Almost a hundred years had passed since then, and he still hadn't been granted peace. Chen Xing couldn't help the little pang of sympathy he felt.

Sima Yao glanced out from behind the folding screen. When he saw Sima Wei, the color drained from his face, and he held his breath.

"Why has Shi Hai come to Jiangnan?" Chen Xing asked earnestly. "Sima Wei, this is your last chance. I promise that whatever you say, Shi Hai won't know about it."

Sima Wei tilted his head, taking Chen Xing in. "First we should lay out terms, exorcist. What can you do for me? If I don't cooperate, do you plan to kill me? I'm already dead."

"I can kill you one more time, the same way I killed your brothers," said Xiang Shu.

Behind the folding screen, Sima Yao mouthed to Xie An, "He must." Xie An, at a loss, didn't respond.

"Then come," said Sima Wei. "To return my soul to the wider world would be a kind of release. I no longer remember who I am."

Chen Xing frowned. "What do you want?"

"Release me. Break the control Shi Hai has over me, and let me go."

"Where do you want to go?" Xie An asked.

"I don't know." Sima Wei shook his head slightly. "The world is vast, and the sky stretches high and far. I simply want to use this second life that Shi Hai gave me to see the world. I'm not the person you all think I am,

even if…” He lifted his hand, and the steel chains clinked as he scratched his head. “I remember the owner of this body, and many of his memories, but I am not him. I’m just me. Shi Hai re-awakened this body, but I am, more precisely, a creation.”

These words caught everyone in the room off guard. All this time, Chen Xing had misjudged Sima Wei. What exactly was this person? Their understanding of him, the only identity he had, was of someone who was long dead. If Sima Wei was not actually Sima Wei, then what was he?

Chen Xing lifted a hand to tell everyone else to wait for a moment. “So you’re using Sima Wei’s body, and you even have a portion of his previous memories, but your nature is that of the being Shi Hai created. Is that correct?”

“It was you and Chiyou who created me,” Sima Wei said. “Shi Hai was simply serving as Chiyou’s hands. That day, on Longzhong Mountain, you used the Heart Lamp. Its power and the power of the Demon God worked together as opposites like yin and yang to reawaken me.” He lifted his hands again to point a broken finger at his own chest. “In here lies a seed of the Heart Lamp. But Shi Hai has not yet found it.”

Finally, Chen Xing had the answer he’d been seeking since that battle in Goguryeo. Sima Wei possessed clarity of mind beyond what he had ever expected, but Chen Xing didn’t know what to say in response. Without thinking, he glanced at Xiang Shu.

“You say that you don’t want to use your life for Shi Hai,” Xiang Shu said. “So why do you follow his commands?”

“I cannot afford to free myself. My body is often not under my control; it’s moved by resentment. When I ambushed you all, it was like an

instinct, an involuntary action—I had no choice. The Heart Lamp was very weak, but it kept waking me up."

"Shi Hai traveled a long way to get here," said Xie An. "What goal does he have in mind?"

"Initially, he wanted to kidnap Chen Xing, refine his Heart Lamp, and turn him into the vessel for the Demon God, Chiyou. Chiyou would then use the new Heart Lamp to plant the seed of obsession into all of the souls in the Divine Land, forcing all living beings with souls to submit to him."

Chen Xing had heard something similar that day near the earth vein. With this corroboration, he was developing a clear idea of the general picture. "Then why did he give up on kidnapping me for the time being?" he asked.

"He identified an artifact that was even more suitable to his purposes: the Dinghai Pearl. He wants to use it to rebuild Chiyou's body. The Dinghai Pearl contains the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth. It's also the soul of the dragon god who controlled causality. With those two things combined, it's an even more suitable vessel than the Heart Lamp."

"What does he want to do after he gets the Dinghai Pearl?" Xiang Shu pressed.

"He wishes to return to the Battle of Banquan and change his destiny—his loss to Xuanyuan-shi."

Chen Xing asked a few more questions of Sima Wei, but Sima Wei's knowledge was limited. There were many things that Shi Hai refused to tell him, and some things he'd only learned by overhearing Shi Hai's discussions with the demon heart. But they had already reaped a bountiful harvest from what he did know.

Chen Xing also learned that the demon heart was hidden within Huanmo Palace, and that Huanmo Palace was located in a specific place where earth veins intersected, though Sima Wei could not confirm where that location was; when Shi Hai brought the drought fiend kings out, they always traveled through the earth veins. Based on his information, if he had captured Chen Xing and brought him back according to Shi Hai's orders, he would have also brought Chen Xing through the earth veins to Huanmo Palace.

They couldn't get specifics on anything more from him, though Xiang Shu was patient and thorough and asked him many questions. By and large, the answers they received matched up with the guesses they had made during their journey.

Finally, Xiang Shu asked, "What powers does Shi Hai actually have?"

"His three immortal souls and seven mortal forms can move independently of his body," Sima Wei replied.

"That's impossible," Chen Xing protested. "No matter how strong a yaoguai is, they can't just do that! Do you think the divine and earth veins are just there for show? Only demons can exist in a formless state."

"His soul is abnormally powerful, and at any given moment, he can switch bodies and return souls," Sima Wei said. "He can even control people with weaker souls through possession. Wang Ziye was no more than a body he was pleased with, and the Heart Lamp remains his only weakness."

What exactly was this guy? It was going to be dangerous to underestimate Wang Ziye's strength. When they'd crossed swords at Lake

Hong, the black smoke that Wang Ziye had become after casting off that scholar's body had shrunk back from Chen Xing's power, but it had shown no fear of blades or spears. That meant that they couldn't win against him.

Chen Xing kept these thoughts to himself. Aloud, he said, "All this about his soul leaving his body and moving about may seem an easy advantage on his part, but it's actually extremely dangerous for him. Even without the Heart Lamp, I could seal away two of his immortal souls using only the Soulfall Bell. And if there was any sort of mana explosion, it would destroy his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms. Sima Wei, there is no reason for you to fear him."

Xie An could see that there was nothing more they could get out of Sima Wei. He looked pleadingly at Chen Xing.

"One last question," Xiang Shu said. "Why does he want to revive Chiyou?"

"I don't know," Sima Wei replied.

This question was one that Chen Xing and Xiang Shu had discussed more than once. Shi Hai's origins were unknown, but he must have lived in this world—insofar as he could be called "alive"—for several hundred years, or perhaps even longer. He had to be a powerful yaoguai to have survived through the Silence of All Magic, and some amount of ambition was to be expected. But to wish to revive Chiyou seemed to suggest that Shi Hai knew the limitations of his own abilities and could not conquer the Divine Land on his own.

Xiang Shu, who knew his own limitations as well as his enemy's, was not giving up. With the motivation of a man who'd fought a hundred

battles without losing, he asked the question again—but just as before, he received no answer.

Sima Yao watched Xie An with anticipation from behind the folding screen. Xie An grasped for something to say. “For tonight,” he managed, “why don’t we—”

“Lock him up,” Xiang Shu said, without waiting for Chen Xing’s input. Well, it was the same thing Chen Xing wanted to say anyway. “Wait until after we’ve taken care of Shi Hai. Then we’ll decide what happens to him.”

Sima Yao’s brow furrowed deeply. The guards who had been waiting off to the side escorted Sima Wei away. Xiang Shu only nodded politely to the emperor before reaching a hand out to Chen Xing and leading him away.

“You’ve offended Sima Yao,” Chen Xing said quietly.

“When his ancestors came at me, I killed all five of them, so why should I worry about him?”

Xiang Shu returned to their rooms and began to organize the results of the day’s interrogation. He thought deeply for a moment before lifting his brush and writing down his notes, and his brow furrowed as he began to analyze them. Chen Xing could see that Xiang Shu was in a good mood.

“Go stare at your Dinghai Pearl,” Xiang Shu said. “What are you daydreaming for?”

“The issue is that I can’t see anything in it!” Chen Xing complained, putting a hand to his forehead.

“If you’re tired, go to sleep.”

When they'd arrived in the palace, Sima Yao had had a bedroom made up for the two of them, at Xiang Shu's request. In addition to watching over the Dinghai Pearl, Xiang Shu needed to stand guard over Chen Xing to prevent any more unexpected incidents. The palace servants had set up folding screens to create an inner and an outer room, with Xiang Shu sleeping on the floor bunk outside while Chen Xing slept on the soft bed inside.

A light rain began to fall outside, and a wave of cold curled around them.

"Is it because of me?" Chen Xing asked from the bed.

Xiang Shu was lying down too, on the other side of the screen, holding the map up over his head to study it. "What?" he asked, baffled by this question.

Chen Xing tipped his head to look at the folding screen, at the silhouette of Xiang Shu. Xiang Shu was lying down with his legs propped up, one folded over the other. "We've found the Dinghai Pearl, so you think that I'm safe now. Isn't that why you're in such a good mood today, Xiang Shu?"

Xiang Shu didn't respond. He gathered up the papers around him and, with a flick of his finger, extinguished the light. Moonlight shone down onto the floor.

"Shulü Kong," Chen Xing said.

Xiang Shu remained silent. He got up, sat down on the floor bed, and tucked his left hand under the pillow.

"In the whole world, you are the person who cares about me the most," Chen Xing told him, a little dejected.

Still Xiang Shu did not respond. Typical. He hovered there, his hand under his pillow, as if hesitating over something.

“But, you see, I don’t want you to… Because you’re afraid that I’m going to be in danger, I don’t want…”

Xiang Shu finally responded. “Why don’t you shut up?” he said, pulling his hand out from under the pillow.

“Xiang Shu, I think we really need to have a good talk.”

Xiang Shu got up, wearing nothing but his inner robe and shorts, and left the bedroom.

Chen Xing sat up. “Where are you going?”

“To get some air,” Xiang Shu said. “Don’t follow me, or I’ll kick your ass.”

Chen Xing threw his hands up in resignation and lay down again. He wanted to find an excuse to ask Xiang Shu to come back, something like *what if someone came in and took me away*, but Xiang Shu didn’t go far. The sound of the Qiang flute reached Chen Xing in fits and starts. Xiang Shu was playing it in the courtyard.

Water dripped down from the eaves, falling onto the remnants of the lotuses that had filled the courtyard. It was late fall. The weather seemed to have grown cold overnight, the chill creeping over all of the southern land, and the Qiang flute’s ancient melody carried a hint of desolation. Chen Xing didn’t know the name of the piece. As he listened, he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Xiang Shu watched the rain for a long time, and it was late into the night when he came back in to sleep and heard Chen Xing moving around restlessly in his own blankets.

He went over to take a look and found Chen Xing curled up into a ball, clearly chilly. Seeing that, Xiang Shu lay down on the soft bed to sleep with him. In his dreams, Chen Xing felt the warmth of him and scooted over, an animal seeking heat, moving forward and pressing into the space in front of him as he slept on soundly.

Jiankang was about to enter winter, and in the month that followed, no matter what he tried, Chen Xing couldn't find a way to free the spiritual qi inside the Dinghai Pearl. Ever since they returned from Lake Hong, the artifact had lain dormant. Meanwhile, every five days, Feng Qianjun, Xie Daoyun, and Xiao Shan passed on messages through courier stations from all across Jiangnan, reporting back on the issues each region's waterways were experiencing.

"The demonic jiao has not left the south," Chen Xing concluded as he finished looking over another letter. "It and Shi Hai are hiding somewhere. What is he waiting for?"

According to Xie An's report, the south had already used all the labor and money it could spare to set up a net from which there would be no escape. The ships could not cover all of the waterways, but monitoring the mouth of the waterways was simple enough. If the demonic jiao escaped toward Luoyang by water, it would be discovered. And Feng Qianjun and the rest were bringing the net ever closer, toward a meeting in Jiankang.

"The Dinghai Pearl," Xiang Shu replied. "Shi Hai won't give up so easily. He's waiting for an opportunity, and he won't stop until he has the Dinghai Pearl."

Xiang Shu took Chen Xing to Mount Nanping again in the hope that they could activate the Dinghai Pearl on the Altar of Seven Stars. As always, nothing happened.

As time passed, Xiang Shu grew frustrated himself. They returned to the island in the middle of Lake Hong, and Chen Xing tried to reenact the situation in which he'd used the Dinghai Pearl, but again, nothing worked.

"Put it there," Xiang Shu said.

Chen Xing put the Dinghai Pearl on the rock.

"Concentrate," Xiang Shu told him. He hefted the Acala Blade. They had reached a decision: they would try to use the Acala Blade to destroy the Dinghai Pearl.

Chen Xing wrapped his arms around Xiang Shu from behind, his entire body glowing with the Heart Lamp's light. Xiang Shu swung the blade down with a yell, and with a loud, clear clang, the Dinghai Pearl sank down into the rock. The rock itself shattered into pieces—but the pearl, when they examined it, was as good as new.

"It didn't work," Chen Xing said dejectedly.

Xiang Shu put down the sword to check on Chen Xing. He was panting a little, so Xiang Shu told him to rest a while and pulled out a flask of water for him to drink.

"Why is it so hard?!" Chen Xing complained. "We *have* the pearl now! But this doesn't even look like the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth! Is it bound to its original holder or something? But then how was I able to use it against Shi Hai?"

Xiang Shu watched Chen Xing vent his frustration for a while. Then, out of nowhere, he smiled, and Chen Xing's irritation melted away.

“I really want to throw this thing away,” Xiang Shu said lightly, taking the Dinghai Pearl back from Chen Xing. He took a step out, arching his body, then straightened, lifted his arm, and threw the pearl directly into Lake Hong.

“Don’t!” Chen Xing went pale with shock, watching the pearl splash into the water with a faint plunk. “AAHHH!” He lost it, grabbing Xiang Shu and shaking him hard, but Xiang Shu just began to laugh loudly. “You’re laughing?!” Chen Xing roared. “Why are you laughing?!”

The smile left Xiang Shu’s face. “Let’s go,” he said seriously.

“Where?!” Chen Xing was holding back tears. He couldn’t believe this. “Are we going to be able to get it back? That thing is our last hope!”

“To Chi Le Chuan. To Lake Barkol. I know of a way there. If we follow that path to its end, we can leave the Central Plains behind.” Xiang Shu tilted his head to look at the autumn sky and the endless waters of Lake Hong. “And if we keep going,” he said stoically, “we’ll pass through Dukhan, through the Loulan Kingdom, and to places even further than that.[10] There won’t be any drought fiends there, and no Dinghai Pearl either. There will be no Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth, no exorcists, no yao, and no demons. There will be nothing, so you won’t need to think about saving anyone ever again.”

Suddenly, Xiang Shu stared directly at Chen Xing. He watched him for a long time.

“Let it all go,” Xiang Shu concluded. “Tomorrow, no matter what happens to the Central Plains, let’s let it all go. Nod and I’ll take you away from here. Shall we?”

The tears in Chen Xing's eyes threatened to spill over. He choked up as he looked back at Xiang Shu, his breaths coming short and sharp. The journey they'd taken to get here, all of those shared woes, their slowly intertwining lives, the many hardships they had overcome, everything they had experienced—it all flashed through his mind, one moment after another. Emotions that he couldn't describe or define crashed over him like a wave, threatening to swallow him whole.

"No, Xiang Shu," he said at last. "We've come this far. I don't want to give up now. Even if every bone in my body breaks, even if I am to die tomorrow… I'm alive today, and that means that we still have hope, right?"

Xiang Shu's solemn gaze on Chen Xing grew impossibly tender. The waters of Lake Hong lapped against the shore, ebbing and flowing as Chen Xing and Xiang Shu continued to simply look at one another. Finally, the corners of Xiang Shu's mouth quirked up a little, and he opened his left hand to reveal the Dinghai Pearl in his palm. What he had thrown into the lake was only a rock.

"I was just teasing you," he said breezily.

Chen Xing began to smile. "I knew it."

"Let's go back. It's about to snow. We'll figure out something eventually," Xiang Shu said, sounding wholly unconcerned. He offered the Dinghai Pearl to Chen Xing.

"Keep it with you," Chen Xing told him.

A cold wind blew past them, and a light, gentle snow began to fall on the banks of Lake Hong. The first snow of winter had come, and in the span of a single night, Jiangnan was covered in a blanket of gleaming white. The snow of Jiangnan was nothing like that north of the Great Wall. When snow fell in Chi Le Chuan, all the colors of the earth and the sky faded to gray, but by the time the snow finished falling in Jiankang, it looked like the white space on an ink painting. The lines of the pavilions and pagodas became even more pronounced under the snow, as if Wang Xizhi had lifted his brush and painted them in bold strokes against the backdrop of the world.

Several months passed, and Chen Xing worked his way through every old tome in Jiankang. Xie An also helped him assemble a think tank composed of talented young descendants of Jiangdong's Xie and Wang families, not to mention a good number from the Sima family. There were

enough of them to make it a grand gathering of scholars from around the world, but in the end, they had nothing to show for their efforts.

Chapter 73

CHEN XING'S MOOD went through several highs and lows as New Year's Eve approached—from anticipation to extreme agitation and from there to despair. Then his hope rekindled under Xiang Shu's comfort until finally, he lost his temper and threw his hands up.

"I'm really not going to figure out how to use the Dinghai Pearl until my last day, am I?" he muttered to himself.

"Your last day?" Xiang Shu asked, having heard what Chen Xing said as he walked into the bedroom.

"The day the battle begins," Chen Xing amended hastily.

In the many months since their encounter with Shi Hai, Feng Qianjun, Xiao Shan, and the others hadn't managed to find hide nor hair of that decaying jiao. The boundaries of their search were slowly closing in around Jiankang, and at this rate, they would return to Jiankang proper by the beginning of spring. Meanwhile, news from the north had them increasingly worried—Murong Chong had been placed under house arrest after returning to Luoyang, and Fu Jian had put Luoyang under martial law as Chang'an organized troops and supplies to move south and attack the Jin.

Jiankang received plenty of military reports, but Fu Jian had locked down most of the communication channels, so Xie An was forced to predict Fu Jian's next move from tax records and the movement of his troops. Everyone knew that this battle was inevitable, yet public support for a military confrontation was hard to find in Jiangnan. The Great Jin still hesitated to mobilize to meet Fu Jian's supposedly invincible cavalry. The

government was also careful not to tell the ordinary citizens that the north had a terrifying army of living corpses just waiting to invade the south.

“The Han emperor is looking to speak with you,” said Xiang Shu. “It’s probably about the battle.”

“There haven’t been any new developments,” Chen Xing told him, exhausted. “None at all.”

“Tomorrow is New Year’s Eve. Are you all going to go offer sacrifices to the gods?”

Chen Xing actually hadn’t realized that the end of another year had already arrived. He had only one year and nine months left. In Jiankang, Sima Yao and the rest of the imperial family customarily offered sacrifices to the gods on New Year’s Eve. Xie An might have also had plans to give a speech to the citizens of Jiangnan then, informing them of the severe situation developing on both sides of the Yangtze River.

Sima Yao had gone out of his way to invite Xiang Shu and Chen Xing to make sure that they would attend the ceremony tomorrow. Presumably, he had something to discuss.

The next day, Chen Xing had to tidy himself up, and he and Xiang Shu both had to put on appropriate clothing and join the Sima family on their outing to offer sacrifices to the heavens. Chen Xing held no official position, but he wore the uniform of exorcists from the Han period: a black cap inlaid with jade, a snow-white Jin ceremonial robe with gold accents, and seven-star cloth shoes. Xiang Shu’s robe was likewise white and gold, though his was cut in the style of a martial robe, and he wore a sword and a pheasant martial crown.

Every New Year's Eve, the citizens of Jiankang swarmed both banks of the Huai River for the grand ceremony of the Sima royal family's sacrificial rites, organized by Xie An. Martial officials had cleared the grounds for this event early in the day. Ten full miles of riverbank were packed with commoners who were also there to pay tribute to the gods, assuming they had the requisite three sticks of incense. Fragrant smoke curled upward all around the river; the atmosphere was very festive.

Later in the evening, the citizens would eat their New Year's Eve dinners; then, Sima Yao would bring his civil and martial officials to Qixuan Temple and ring the bell to spread fortune to the thousands of citizens of Great Jin. Every family would don new clothes and carry peach-wood charms today as they celebrated the New Year with that dragon among men, the Son of Heaven, saying goodbye to the old and ushering in the new.

Chen Xing and Sima Yao sat in the same carriage as they left Taichu Palace and headed for the banks of the Huai River. Xiang Shu and the martial officials rode outside on horseback, acting as guards and occasionally attracting sky-shaking cheers from onlookers. From the gossip he heard every time he went out, Chen Xing knew that people were once again jockeying to marry the Protector Martial God. He pretended not to hear it; he'd long since gotten used to the ardor Xiang Shu attracted wherever he went.

"We believe," said Sima Yao, sounding untroubled, "that the Great Chanyu should assume his original role at the ceremony."

Chen Xing was the only other person in the carriage, and he could guess what Sima Yao wanted: Xiang Shu wearing the royal Hu robe of the Great Chanyu, riding a chariot to show his face in Jiangnan, earning the

Sima clan and the Xie family the people's support in the oncoming conflict between the north and the south.

"Your Majesty, Shulü Kong is no longer the Great Chanyu," Chen Xing reminded him politely.

Ever since they offended Sima Yao over the matter of Sima Wei, Chen Xing had been avoiding extensive interaction with Sima Yao. Everyone had their own goals. Take, for example, Fu Jian and Sima Yao: However fervently Fu Jian pursued southern expansion, Sima Yao was equally motivated to protect his own territory. Conflict was unavoidable sometimes, no matter how much the parties involved wished otherwise. Chen Xing and Sima Yao were both accustomed to having to offend people they would have much preferred not to offend, and they knew that too much open discussion might sour their relations. It was better not to say things that didn't absolutely need to be said.

"About the dragon," said Sima Yao. "Has it been located?"

"To be precise, it's a jiao. And it was once one of our Han people. It's exceedingly difficult to locate it with any certainty within such a limited timeframe…"

"Pu-dashi has told Us that he believes that if you can control that dragon, you could make it serve Us instead."

"Your Majesty, that's far too difficult a feat."

"Being the emperor is so tedious," Sima Yao sighed. "No matter what We suggest, it's rejected. Our hair can't even grow properly."

"It's best to focus on preparing for battle. That's the only thing that cannot be negotiated away." For a while, they had nothing else to say to each other. Chen Xing knew that Sima Yao's requests were typically not

mere flights of fancy. He had to protect his country and his people, and that was a heavy responsibility; his ideas may have seemed sudden and far-fetched, but they were hardly surprising.

“In that case, there is still one thing that you can do for Us.”

“Whatever it is, I will do my best,” Chen Xing replied politely. He only had a little more than a year left of his life, and the thought made him anxious.

“Detain that Wang Ziye and his dragon in Jiangnan. No matter what happens, you can’t let those yao, demons, monsters, and devils be a part of the battle on the day We and Fu Jian clash.”

“That is exactly what we’re trying to do. We’re searching for Gu Qing. Feng-dage is desperate to find her too.”

“That young lady is probably already dead.” Sima Yao sighed. “Tianchi, we must all learn to accept reality. If she can’t be saved, she can’t be saved, and if this thing—dragon, jiao, whatever—appears on the battlefield, you know what the consequences will be.”

In the preceding half year or so, news of a “dragon” appearing in Kuaiji had spread across Jiangnan. Rumor had it that Sima Yao had defied the will of heaven, that the dragon was a sign Jiangnan was about to undergo a change in dynasties. This frustrated Sima Yao endlessly, and all of his efforts to identify the source of the rumors came up short. His only remaining hope was for Chen Xing to catch Shi Hai and the jiao as soon as possible.

Chen Xing did, of course, know what the consequences would be. If the two armies clashed and something that looked like a dragon came flying in to help Fu Jian, the soldiers would assume that the Qin monarch had the

Mandate of Heaven. The Jin soldiers' loss of morale would lead to an instant collapse. Sometimes, being seen as having the Mandate of Heaven was enough to guarantee one side's victory in a war. It was not a concern to take lightly.

"Your Majesty can rest assured," Chen Xing told him, "that as long as I draw breath, I will keep it from wreaking wreak havoc on the battlefield."

Outside the carriage, among the martial officials, Xiang Shu rode his horse at an average pace. His martial robe, accessories, and appearance were all eye-catching, and though he was in among the Great Jin's martial officials, he received a more enthusiastic response from the citizens than any of them. Xiang Shu didn't like being pointed at, so he turned his head away and paid more attention to the horse carriage, listening attentively to Chen Xing and Sima Yao's conversation and blocking out the wild shouts. Unfortunately, when he turned his head, he treated the crowd to a view of his stunning profile, and the cheers grew even louder.

Pu Yang rode his horse over from the other side and nodded to Xiang Shu, who obediently slowed down and fell into step with him.

"I've found some answers regarding the matter that you wanted to investigate," Pu Yang said. "Over the past few months, I read through all of the records pertaining to astrology and natal charts that were passed down through my sect."

"Tell me," Xiang Shu said in a resonant tone.

"It's very rare for Sui Xing to be intertwined with a person's life, but what I can confirm is…"

When they reached the Huai River, Chen Xing helped Sima Yao down from the carriage. The setting for the sacrificial rites had already been laid out. It was by Sima Yao's command that the Great Exorcist and Protector Martial God were allowed to attend him for today's ceremony. The idea was to improve public opinion about Sima Yao; when the citizens of Jiangnan saw Chen Xing and Xiang Shu, they would know that their emperor had the Mandate of Heaven on his side.

"Where's the Martial God?" Sima Yao asked.

"Yeah, where did he run off to this time?" Chen Xing frowned and looked toward the tail end of the procession, where his eyes immediately found the extraordinarily handsome figure of Xiang Shu.

He looks so good, Chen Xing thought. Among the hundreds of neatly arrayed Jin civil and martial officials, Xiang Shu stood out from the crowd.

Xiang Shu was speaking with Pu Yang, who seemed to have moved during the trip to ride next to Xiang Shu. Pu Yang was quietly explaining something to Xiang Shu, but Xiang Shu wasn't looking at him. His deep-set eyes pierced right through the mob of officials and fixed unblinking on Chen Xing.

Chen Xing gestured urgently to him. The rites were about to commence, and a palpable silence fell as thousands of citizens waited for Xiang Shu to finish his conversation; Chen Xing was anxious beyond compare. But soon Pu Yang concluded his explanation, and Chen Xing saw Xiang Shu rein in his horse and urge it on through the dense throng of people. The crowd hastily cleared a path after the mighty steed nearly trampled several onlookers, and Sima Yao's expression hardened.

Then, in front of hundreds of thousands of people, Xiang Shu leaped off his horse and mounted the sacrificial platform in a few quick strides. He grabbed hold of Chen Xing's wrist, startling everyone.

"What?!" Chen Xing demanded. "What are you doing?"

Xiang Shu's face was contorted with fury. "You… You…"

"Don't do this now!" Chen Xing hissed. "What have I done to piss you off? Can we talk about it after we get back? Hundreds of thousands of people are watching us!"

The banks of the Huai River were teeming with people; ordinary citizens, the entire Jin court, the royal family, Xie An, and the other officials —not to mention the emperor himself. All eyes were fixed warily on Xiang Shu. He refused to let go and instead raised his hand, Chen Xing's wrist still firmly in his grasp.

“It…hurts… It hurts! You’re using too much strength!”

Xiang Shu lowered his hand again, but he still didn’t let go. His breath came fast and harsh.

“Martial God?” Sima Yao approached them. “If there’s…a conflict between you two young lovers, why don’t you settle it after you return? Think of Our reputation; for now, please let it go. Look at all the people down there.”

Countless Jiangnan citizens were gawking up at them, and whispers began to spread through the crowd. Why was Xiang Shu behaving so boorishly in front of so many people?

“Okay,” Chen Xing said to Xiang Shu. “What exactly do you want to say? Let’s just have all these people wait, shall we, so that we can straighten things out between us. That’s the most *important* thing. Your Majesty, please be patient—”

Xiang Shu let go of Chen Xing’s wrist. “Continue,” he said to Sima Yao, his voice like ice.

Seeing the looks on their faces, Sima Yao realized that the waves of anger coming from both of them didn’t stem from the same source. If any of his officials had caused such a commotion during the sacrificial rites, Sima Yao might not necessarily have had them dragged off and whipped, but they would certainly have lost their jobs. The problem was that Chen Xing was not his to control; Xiang Shu even less so. If he tried to lean on his status as the emperor, Xiang Shu might even beat him up. There was nothing for him to do but swallow his anger and nod to Xie An.

Xie An cleared his throat. “Then let us begin.”

The attendants spread out the yellow brocade and lit the giant brazier. Holding a peach-wood sword and standing to one side of the platform, Chen Xing yelled, “In this Spring Festival of the Renwu Year,[11] the exorcist in the mortal realm and his Protector Martial God bestow their protection on the Great Jin Emperor.”

“A little louder,” Sima Yao whispered to him.

“My throat hurts. Have Xiang Shu say it.”

Xiang Shu frown deepened. When Chen Xing nudged him, he shouted impatiently, “In this Spring Festival of the Renwu Year, the exorcist in the mortal realm, Chen Xing, and his Protector Martial God, Shulü Kong, bestow their protection on the Great Jin Emperor!”

His thunderous shout reverberated through the skilled fighters of the Great Jin army like the ringing of a great bell, resonating across both banks of the Huai River and changing the expression on every face for nearly ten miles. What manner of skill was this? Not even Fu Jian, the self-described strongest warrior in the world, could do such a thing! None of the almost ten thousand martial officials assembled below the platform could have dreamed of producing a roar like that.

Sima Yao and Chen Xing were the closest to Xiang Shu, and they were so shaken that they almost spat blood. Chen Xing turned white as a sheet until Xiang Shu pressed a hand down on his shoulder; an abundant wave of warm energy entered his body, and he immediately felt better.

“This day marks the sixty-ninth year since the Yongjia Rebellion,” Sima Yao said slowly, once he’d caught his breath. “We have never forgotten the atrocities committed against our Great Jin.” He pressed his hand on top of the imperial seal, which was lying on the imperial brocade.

“Citizens of Our Great Jin! Today, in addition to the spring rites, We have things to tell you all.”

A hush fell over the hundreds of thousands of Jin citizens assembled along the banks of the Huai River as they strained to listen. Even the birds were silent.

It was then that an immense black shadow almost two hundred feet in length appeared at the bottom of the waters of the Huai River. Under the brightness of daylight, some people noticed it, and when Chen Xing heard a few whispers break the hush along the river, he turned his head to shoot Xie An a questioning look. Xiang Shu saw it too.

“We must tell you all,” Sima Yao continued in his clear voice, “that even this patch of land that is Jiangnan has already—”

Xiang Shu’s hand went to his sword as the waters of the Huai River exploded outwards and a rotting jiao shot into the sky, oozing black energy.

Utter chaos erupted on the banks of the Huai River. Citizens pushed and shoved at each other in an effort to flee, and more than a few fell into the water. On the far side of the river, Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan leapt up to land in a crouch on the railings at either side of the platform, their eyes locked on the decaying jiao.

Chen Xing startled.

“I knew you wouldn’t have gone far,” muttered Xiang Shu.

Gu Qing was sitting on the jiao’s head, enveloped in such thick resentment that she and the jiao melded into one shadowy figure. Xiang Shu drew his sword and stepped in front of Chen Xing and Sima Yao.

“The Jin’s Son of Heaven!” Wang Ziye cried, his voice echoing across the banks of the river.

Chen Xing’s blood seemed to have frozen, but Xie An was ready. He lifted his hand, and nearly twenty thousand members of the Beifu army appeared on rooftops and balconies all around them, each one armed with a crossbow. Their ambush was in place.

“You’ve finally come,” Xie An said evenly.

When Chen Xing looked around and saw the unsurprised expressions around him, he realized they’d prepared for this. This must have been what Xiang Shu had been doing while Chen Xing was agonizing over the Dinghai Pearl. The initial wave of horror that had washed over him began to subside.

“Your days are numbered, and they are quickly running out,” said Wang Ziye in a measured voice. “The new Son of Heaven will replace you down here in this mortal realm. No one can defy the mandate of heaven, and the heavens themselves have sent me to issue this decree: If you refuse to recognize the error of your ways, then all of Jiangnan will burn.”

Chapter 74

FOR THE HUNDREDS of thousands of assembled soldiers and civilians, the impact of all this—the appearance of a demonic jiao and a bad celestial omen at the sacrificial ceremony—was devastating. Most couldn't tell a demonic jiao from a true dragon, and they held their breath as Wang Ziye purported to share a prophecy under the auspices of divine descent.

"Silence!" Chen Xing bellowed furiously, his voice echoing along the banks of the Huai River. Sima Yao had been about to counter Wang Ziye's claim, having been forewarned of potential disruptions to the ceremony by Xiang Shu, but Chen Xing's timely outburst was far more effective than any words he might have offered. "The Sima family are the true heirs to the Mandate of Heaven! Since the Yongjia Rebellion and the exodus of the aristocracy to the south, Jiangnan has enjoyed sixty-nine years of peace, and the Sima imperial family has protected the lives of billions in the south! You're nothing but a monstrous jiao causing chaos and destruction—what right do you have to claim the Mandate of Heaven?"

The jiao let out a piercing screech, and Wang Ziye's cold voice rang out. "Then prepare for your annihilation!"

"Fire!" Xie An commanded.

"Protect His Majesty!" shouted the military officers. The imperial guards began to evacuate the civilians.

Moving as one, tens of thousands of soldiers stationed on both riverbanks shot grappling hooks from their crossbows, ensnaring the jiao before Wang Ziye could guide it higher into the air. It crashed down into the

river, creating towering waves that overturned the altar and doused Chen Xing with frigid water. Xie An grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him out of the crowd.

“Xiang Shu! Xiang Shu!” Chen Xing shouted.

“Xiaoshidi!” Xie An barked. “Escort His Majesty to safety!”

“Stick to the plan!” Xiang Shu yelled. “Lure it to the riverbank!”

“Go!” Xie Daoyun rushed onto the altar, sword in hand. She seized Chen Xing, shouting, “Your Majesty! Withdraw with us!”

Xie An’s plan was meticulous and thorough, but the jiao was significantly stronger than it had been during the battle in Kuaiji. Wang Ziye had somehow infused the half-rotted creature with resentment, fully healing its wounds and enhancing its speed in flight. The jiao easily shook off Xiang Shu and his group and dove straight at Sima Yao.

“Today, I will rid the heavens of this scourge,” Wang Ziye rasped with a deranged laugh.

Sima Yao’s fury overcame his imperial composure. “The only scourge here is you, you bastard!” he roared. “Watch me—”

“Your Majesty, stop cursing!” Xie Daoyun shouted, grabbing hold of Sima Yao’s collar from behind. “We need to escape!”

The jiao circled them, then turned to Sima Yao, opened its massive jaws, and charged at him with a deafening roar. Sima Yao cried, “Exorcists! We have the Great Exorcist—”

“Don’t count on me!” Chen Xing exploded. “Where’s my protector?! Where is he?!”

The corrupted jiao soared through the air, stirring up a powerful gust that sent the imperial guards flying in all directions. Xie Daoyun tackled Chen Xing and Sima Yao to the ground. Xiang Shu and Xie An sprinted down the long street, but no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't catch up to the flying jiao.

Many of the commoners who hadn't yet evacuated believed the jiao to be a true dragon, and they'd seen it scatter Sima Yao's imperial guards in a single blow. They knelt in worship.

"That's a monster!" Xie An roared. "Don't bow to it!"

Xiang Shu jumped onto the rooftops. "Chen Xing, run!" he shouted urgently into the distance. "Xing-er!"

With the guards gone, only Chen Xing and Sima Yao remained. Chen Xing had only one option left: make a break for the nearby mountain, dragging Sima Yao behind him.

"Aren't you an exorcist?" shouted Sima Yao, struggling to keep up as they ran for their lives. "Hurry and summon your flying sword to kill it!"

"I don't have any spells!" Chen Xing shouted.

"Then what can you do?" Sima Yao asked, utterly shocked.

"I already told you! I told you when we first met that I couldn't use any spells!"

This group was nothing but a pack of charlatans! Here was a man who called himself an exorcist, and now, when an exorcist was needed most, he claimed he couldn't do anything?

Chen Xing bent down and rested his hands on his knees, panting heavily. He looked up at Sima Yao. “Your Majesty, to be honest with you, all I know how to do is run. That, and I happen to be very lucky. Is that good enough?”

“My kingdom!” Sima Yao howled. “My people! How can they worship a monster?!” This was even worse than the devastation the jiao had caused in Jiankang. Sima Yao was on the verge of spitting blood in fury.

“It’s coming back!” Xie Daoyun yelled. “Quick, find a place to hide!”

As the demonic jiao dove, it spotted the two of them running past a stone archway on the mountain by the Huai River. With a thunderous roar, it swooped down toward them. They stood out in the open, exposed with no cover, while Wang Ziye shot at them with the force of a thunderbolt.

Just before it could strike and tear the Han emperor apart, Chen Xing shouted, “Let’s go with the usual! Sui Xing, help!”

“What… What-Xing?” Sima Yao hadn’t yet recovered his wits. Chen Xing lunged forward and threw himself on Sima Yao, holding him tightly, and Sima Yao screamed, “Let go of me! I don’t want to die with you!”

But Chen Xing refused to let go, and they stood there, braced for impact. With a deafening roar, the creature closed in on them—and slammed directly into the stone archway. *Bang!* It tried to move, but its head was wedged tightly between the pillars.

Sima Yao stared at it, unblinking. Chen Xing released him and turned to look. “Ah,” he said. Sure enough, Sui Xing had demonstrated its astonishing power once again.

The jiao's body now hung near the mountain, and Wang Ziye was nowhere to be seen; the impact with the stone archway had sent him flying. The creature's fangs were less than a foot away from them, and it was desperately trying to open its mouth, but its jaw was wedged against the ground. It couldn't release its toxic mist.

The corrupted jiao stared at them. Sima Yao stared right back.

Chen Xing dragged Sima Yao back half a step. The demonic jiao braced its front claws against the cliffside and kept struggling, clearly trying to pull its head free. The stone archway shook and scraped along the ground under the force of the jiao's movements, and the ground beneath it began to tremble.

Sima Yao was the first to recover. "Now!" he shouted. "Now, go up and kill it!"

"No, no! We can't kill it!" Chen Xing said quickly. "Someone, help! Where is everyone?!"

The guards were still running round the foot of the mountain. "Did you bring your sword?" Sima Yao asked.

Chen Xing only had a ritual peach-wood sword. He tried to strike the demonic jiao, but the sword snapped immediately. "We need to leave! It's about to break free! Let's go!"

He tossed the broken sword aside, turned, and ran, dragging Sima Yao along after him again. It wasn't long before they heard a loud crash behind them. The demonic jiao had struggled so violently that it had yanked the entire stone archway out of its foundation.

Luckily for them, the stone archway weighed over ten thousand pounds and was wedged onto the demonic jiao's head perfectly, like a

heavy shackle. Sima Rui, Emperor Yuan of Jin, had erected this archway for Wang Dun, with the words “Charity and Benevolence” inscribed on it in large characters. The stone pillars on either side were made of white jade marble and adorned with gold paint—grand in style and very heavy. The demonic jiao only managed to fly a few yards before the archway dragged it back down. Its head slammed into the ground and smashed the azure brick pavement along the riverbank into pieces.

Wang Ziye finally returned, still in Gu Qing’s body, and leaped back onto the jiao’s head. The jiao strained to adjust its posture and tried to take flight, but carrying the ten-thousand-pound Charity and Benevolence archway proved too much for it; it struggled to stay airborne and couldn’t control the direction of its flight. Each time it tried to turn, the archway pulled it off course and sent it spinning wildly.

“What’s going on?” Wang Ziye asked, just managing to avoid being slammed into the ground. In the brief time before he made his way back to the jiao, this once-formidable creature, capable of facing down tens of thousands of soldiers, had gotten a stone archway jammed on its head that drastically diminished its combat ability. And to make matters worse, the “dragon” he’d intended as a symbol of a heavenly decree now had the words “Charity and Benevolence” hanging from its head. It was absurd! Wang Ziye had no idea what to do next.

“Over there!” Xie An shouted, rushing toward them. “Quick, fire the arrows!”

The demonic jiao had been slowed down too much. The entire Jin army had caught up to it, and they crested the hill now, bombarding the jiao with grappling hooks and swiftly ensnaring it again.

Wang Ziye had no idea how the Jin forces had foreseen his plan. This wasn't how this was supposed to go! He should have killed the Jin emperor in one strike while Sima Yao performed the celestial ritual, then been able to just fly away, crushing the morale of the Jin army. Instead, everything was falling apart. He tried to get the jiao to free itself from its restraints, and it struggled, dragging thousands of ropes behind it as it flew along the river's surface.

Chen Xing, Sima Yao, the royal family, and their guards were gathered together and moved to one side. Xie An remained calm and authoritative, and he had the imperial guards and the Beifu army out in full force.

"Great Exorcist," said Sima Yao, "can your…artifact be of use? We must capture this monster today!"

Chen Xing was still wrapping his head around it all. "How did you know this guy was planning to launch a surprise attack?"

"The Martial God predicted it," Xie An told him. "Worry not, Your Majesty. The ropes used to bind the demonic jiao are made of woven steel."

Sima Yao and Chen Xing exchanged a glance. Sima Yao was clearly agitated; his lips were trembling uncontrollably. Suddenly, he leaned over and whispered something into Xie Daoyun's ear. She nodded, turned, and rushed off.

An imperial guard rushed in, followed by Xiao Shan and Feng Qianjun. "The monster has fled to the southern part of the city!"

"Then let's go to the south of the city," Chen Xing said.

"You stay here," Feng Qianjun said. "Xiang-xiongdi doesn't want you involved in the battle. Your only task is to protect the emperor."

“No! I have to fight! What do you take me for?!” Seeing Xiao Shan hesitate, Chen Xing grabbed his arm. “Xiao Shan, take me with you!”

Chen Xing couldn’t see Xiang Shu anywhere. He must have gone after the jiao. Frustrated, Chen Xing glanced at Sima Yao and saw Xie Daoyun approach him with a long sword in its scabbard. Sima Yao drew the jeweled sword in front of everyone. Its hilt glinted with colorful gems. Xie An stared at it, momentarily speechless.

“They’ve come for me,” Sima Yao said. “What kind of emperor would just sit back and do nothing?”

“Good, let’s go!” Chen Xing agreed.

Sima Yao took off, and the crowd gasped in shock and chased after him. “Your Majesty!” Wang Xizhi shouted, panicked. “Your Majesty, that imperial sword can’t kill the enemy!”

The demonic jiao was flying through the city, crashing into everything, still wearing its Charity and Benevolence archway. No matter how it struggled, it couldn’t break free from the ropes—but neither could the Jin army subdue it. Xiang Shu stood on a high platform, overseeing the battle—he’d clearly devised a detailed plan for dealing with the creature. Step one was complete: They had used steel ropes to restrain the jiao like a fish in a net, and they would kill it once it had worn itself out in its attempts to get free.

Feng Qianjun and Xiao Shan were recalled to Jiankang. Now that Gu Qing had finally appeared, everyone was giving it their all in pursuit of the Charity and Benevolence jiao along the riverbanks.

Chen Xing climbed to the top of a large building in the south of the city and called out, “Xiang Shu! Come back here!”

Xiang Shu didn’t hear him, but he sensed it the moment Chen Xing activated the Heart Lamp. He glanced at Chen Xing, his brow furrowing deeply, then turned and moved along the rooftops toward him.

“Go back,” he said flatly. “Take the emperor back to Taichu Palace.”

“Listen to me,” said Chen Xing, his Heart Lamp glowing brightly—but Xiang Shu grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm behind his back, leaning in close to Chen Xing’s ear.

“I can handle this,” he whispered. “I don’t need the Heart Lamp.” He glanced over Chen Xing’s shoulder at Sima Yao, who was not far off.

“You won’t be able to exorcise Wang Ziye without the Heart Lamp!” Chen Xing protested. “Gu Qing will die! And there’s hundreds of thousands of people watching—you have to use magic as powerful as theirs to eliminate them!”

Wang Ziye had appeared with the demonic jiao during the celestial ritual, and his aim was clear: to use the “Mandate of Heaven” to decimate Jiangnan’s morale. A “dragon” had arrived to deny the legitimacy of the Sima family’s claim to the Mandate of Heaven. What more was there to say?

Every dynasty since the pre-Qin period had placed great importance on omens and portents. If the jiao escaped, the morale in Jiangnan would collapse over the next few years, and the Sima family’s reputation, painstakingly built over many years with the help of the Wang and Xie families, would collapse too. The black dragon had already appeared. Even if the elite forces of Jiangnan managed to slaughter the jiao, the battle

would still be seen as one between man and heaven. The only way to counteract such an omen was to summon another, equally powerful omen, destroy the so-called dragon in full view of the people of the Great Jin, and publicly declare the Sima family the true holders of the Mandate of Heaven.

Suddenly, Chen Xing noticed something strange—a faint black aura at the center of Xiang Shu's brow. How long had that been there? Was it from the battle with Wang Ziye in Lake Hong? Had Wang Ziye managed to use resentment to corrupt his protector?!

All of Xiang Shu's mana came from the Heart Lamp, and any lingering resentment in his soul would be revealed under its light.

"You must use it," Chen Xing insisted stubbornly. With some effort, he broke free of Xiang Shu's grasp. "Xiang Shu, I don't have time to waste right now explaining what I'm thinking."

Xiang Shu grew suddenly enraged. "You will die!"

Chen Xing punched him with a fist that radiated boundless light. "Exorcise!" he shouted furiously.

A deafening roar filled the air, and the world seemed to change color. Xiang Shu felt a flash of light pass through him, illuminating his mind, his heart, and the entire world around him in blinding white. The fire blazed so hot it nearly burned away his soul—and the resentment that Wang Ziye had left in him vanished into smoke.

Chen Xing's body was engulfed in the Heart Lamp's fiery light. Choosing each word carefully, he said, "Xiang Shu, I know you're afraid. Afraid that the Heart Lamp will reduce me to ashes. But…have you ever respected my wish? My only wish in life?" He gazed into Xiang Shu's eyes.

His voice was solemn. “I’ve always been willing to sacrifice everything for this. I won’t hesitate, not even if it means being shattered beyond repair.”

Xiang Shu stared at him, stunned. “Is there no other desire in your heart?” he asked finally.

Chen Xing turned his head, avoiding Xiang Shu’s gaze. “If you want to do something for me, then go,” he said, then turned back and stubbornly locked eyes with Xiang Shu again. “Save Gu Qing. You’re the only one who can. Eliminate this jiao in front of the people, just like the protectors before you. You are the Protector Martial God, and this is our mission.”

Xiang Shu didn’t speak again. He turned to look at the demonic jiao, which was struggling desperately, its body riddled with arrows and its green blood staining the Huai River.

“Even if it meant flying into the fire and turning to ash,” Xiang Shu murmured, his gaze fixed on the jiao, “you still wouldn’t hesitate?”

“Exactly. I’ve always done what I believe is right.”

Xiang Shu suddenly turned to face him again, his expression dangerous. “No room for negotiation?”

Chen Xing’s face was set in a stubborn glower, but he remained silent.

Xiang Shu’s voice dropped to a menacing tone. “Then if a day comes when I do what *I* believe is right, you remember what you said today.”

“What are you planning? If you refuse to listen to me”—finally, Chen Xing said the heaviest words—“then just leave.”

Xiang Shu took a deep breath, then lifted the Acala Blade. Chen Xing knew that meant he was relenting. He summoned the full power of his

Heart Lamp, burning brighter than ever before.

A beam of light radiated out under the darkened sky. Xiang Shu's body erupted in a blinding glow. His long hair turned to burning flames, and the gilded ceremonial robe shimmered with light and took on the shape of his golden armor. In his hand, the Sword of Wisdom gleamed, and five divine weapons rotated slowly behind him.

Then, engulfed in that radiant light, Xiang Shu transformed into a blazing comet and shot toward the river.

Chen Xing formed the Heart Lamp seal with his hands and, to his own astonishment, began to levitate into the air. The fleeing citizens looked up at this spectacle in the sky, and many of them knelt in reverence.

"By the will of the heavens and earth," Chen Xing said, his voice booming in the sky over Jiankang. He pushed the power of his soul to the limit, and a massive Dipamkara materialized behind him. "With the power of the Great Exorcist, I command the Protector Martial God…

"Exorcise!"

At Chen Xing's command, the Dipamkara behind him put its hands together into the Heart Lamp seal. Xiang Shu's light flared up again, the Acalanātha figure appearing at his back, and he roared in fury as he soared toward Wang Ziye and the jiao.

"Now this is more like it," Wang Ziye sneered.

Unable to restrain his fury any longer, Xiang Shu poured all of his strength into the attack. His eyes went bloodshot as he roared and swung his sword in a powerful strike to the jiao's head. "Expel!"

Wang Ziye moved Gu Qing's body, and resentment surged toward Xiang Shu, curling around his sword and wrapping itself around him—but

golden flames erupted from Xiang Shu’s body, bursting through the resentment and incinerating it.

Wang Ziye let out a strange laugh. As the golden flames spiraled back toward Xiang Shu, he left Gu Qing's body.

"Qing-er!"

Feng Qianjun grabbed one of the hooks and lunged, but Xiao Shan was faster. He climbed onto the jiao's head and, with one sharp claw, secured Gu Qing and pulled her down. Feng Qianjun leaped and caught her as they fell from the jiao's head.

Meanwhile, Xiang Shu cleaved his sword straight through the jiao's skull. A burst of lightning shot from his sword and, with a blinding flash, the jiao was split open from its head to its tail. With a loud splat, the demonic jiao was torn in two. Its poisonous blood sprayed everywhere, and the resentment inside it tumbled into the Huai River, where it dispersed.

"Well done!" shouted Sima Yao, raising his sword, as the citizens along the riverbank erupted in cheers.

Chen Xing withdrew the Heart Lamp, and the world around him went black. He began to fall, but Xiang Shu turned and flew toward him, catching him in midair and descending to the rooftop. Tiles scattered in all directions as they slid off the roof and crashed onto the street below.

Chen Xing's eyes were closed. A trickle of blood flowed from the corner of his mouth.

"Martial God!" Xie An rushed over with a pack of soldiers. Cheers filled the streets of Jiankang, and Xiang Shu knelt on the ground, exhausted, holding Chen Xing's unconscious body in his arms.

Chapter 75

IN THE PALACE, Chen Xing lay quietly on the bed. Sound asleep like this, he seemed younger, his face carefree as a child's. After the battle, Xiang Shu had lifted him into his arms and carried him into the carriage and back to the Xie manor in Jiankang, never letting go of him for a moment. It seemed as though Chen Xing had sunk into a long, sweet sleep after the stress of the battle, but no matter how hard they tried, they could not wake him.

"The energy levels of his soul were badly depleted," Pu Yang concluded after checking him over. "He needs sleep to recover."

"When will he wake?" Feng Qianjun asked. He'd been frowning heavily throughout Pu Yang's examination. "Last time he slept for three full months, and there are so many things that need his attention now. What should we do if he keeps sleeping like this?"

The bedroom was filled with people. Among them was Xie Daoyun's master Zhu Jin, whom she had invited here to assess Chen Xing's condition. "It's hard to say," he said. He took Chen Xing's pulse, but things like mana, exorcism, and the three immortal souls and seven mortal forms, were outside of his area of medical expertise. The only advice he could give was to tell Xiang Shu to look after Chen Xing well.

Pu Yang handed Xiang Shu an old, yellowing tome. "Here are all the records on souls that were passed down in my sect. Please, take a look."

Everyone else dispersed then, leaving Xiang Shu and Xiao Shan sitting beside the bed. Xiang Shu looked down and began to flip through the

book, but he couldn’t focus, so he looked up again at Chen Xing. “Sui Xing governing a person’s life,” he said quietly. “Is it true?”

Chen Xing didn’t respond. He slumbered on.

“Is what true?” asked Xiao Shan.

Xiang Shu shook his head and sat down cross-legged on the floor. He pulled out the Dinghai Pearl and studied it in silence.

Xiao Shan climbed onto the bed and kneeled there to press one hand to Chen Xing’s forehead. “He’ll get better, right?”

Xiang Shu’s heart and mind were troubled. He let out an exhausted sigh. He was holding back his temper; he didn’t want to say anything more. After a moment, he swept out of the room and into the courtyard, where he swung the Acala Blade through the air with an angry roar, but it couldn’t express all the anger simmering in his heart.

Xiao Shan, of course, didn’t really understand what was going on. Chen Xing had woken up last time; naturally, he would wake up this time too. But Xiang Shu’s reaction clearly went beyond mere worry.

From early morning until noon, Xiang Shu practiced a set of sword forms out in the courtyard. Finally, he came back in, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily, and lay down on the floor with his limbs splayed out. His eyes stared emptily at the ceiling. In the afternoon, Xiao Shan came by and saw that Xiang Shu still hadn’t eaten; he had the ancient tome from Pu Yang open in front of him and was poring over it carefully.

It was a book that detailed instances of mana resonance between ancient exorcists and their protectors. Back then, after the Silence of All Magic and the dissolution of the Exorcism Department, Pu Yang’s sect founder had transcribed many of the ancient tomes. Most of the techniques

described therein couldn’t be used any more due to the Silence of All Magic, but their uses and the theories regarding them had all been preserved in detail. For example, for a protector and their exorcist, if the three immortal souls and seven mortal forms were severely damaged due to overuse of mana, the book recorded other, non-medicinal methods that could ignite their mana and thus increase the speed of the soul’s repair.

As Xiang Shu read, his gaze suddenly stopped on one page. He whipped his head around to look at Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu went back and read the few pages before it, then the few after it. Finally, he set the book down on the table carefully—it was almost falling apart—and got up to take a bath. There was a ready supply of hot water every day in the palace. After he finished washing, he went to burn some incense. When he returned to the room, he approached the bed barefoot, wrapped in nothing but a cotton bathrobe and a pair of long pants.

Xiang Shu was more nervous in that moment than he had ever been in his life. He sank to one knee next to the bed, revealing a bare calf banded with muscle, before reaching out to cover the back of Chen Xing’s hand.

“I’ll try it,” he said to himself. “There isn’t much time left.” And then he got up and put his hands to the belt of the bathrobe.

Xiao Shan blinked. He’d returned holding a box of food for Xiang Shu and was now staring suspiciously from the doorway. “Great Chanyu?”

Xiang Shu paused, halfway through undoing the knot on his waistband. He turned his head quickly, frowning. “You get out.”

“What are you doing?” Xiao Shan asked, undeterred.

“What does that have to do with you?”

Xiao Shan’s suspicions sharpened. He was only thirteen, and he often pretended to understand what was going on when he didn’t really, but he remembered seeing something similar that day in the Kuaiji governor’s manor, and he came to the same conclusion now that he had then. But it was clear that Xiang Shu didn’t want him to see anything more. He turned and sat down wordlessly on the bed, and the two of them stared silently at each other. Xiao Shan was very confused.

The two of them were in a strange deadlock—one big, one small; Xiang Shu sitting, Xiao Shan standing. They stared each other down for almost fifteen minutes before Xiao Shan finally gave up and set the food box down on the table.

Xiang Shu latched the door behind him and waited for a while longer to confirm that Xiao Shan was not lurking outside and peeking in. Xiao Shan’s antics had disrupted his nerves, and they were gone now, like smoke on the wind. He untied his bathrobe, baring his entire upper body, and lay down on the bed.

He arranged Chen Xing’s head so that it was pillowed against his arm before breathing in deeply, recalling the instant back at the river when Chen Xing had ignited his three immortal souls and seven mortal forms to provide him with mana—and that inadvertently reminded him of the day in Kuaiji when, in a fit of anxiety, he had stolen away all of Chen Xing’s mana. But when he lay down with Chen Xing, Chen Xing seemed to feel it; still deep in his dreams, he snuggled into Xiang Shu’s embrace, pressing up against the heat of his chest.

Chen Xing was only wearing a simple inner robe and shorts, and Xiang Shu’s upper half was completely bare. When Chen Xing curled up

against him, Xiang Shu's breath stopped for a moment. His blood coursed hot through his body, and he felt dazed.

He lifted Chen Xing's hand and set it on his own waist, then wrapped his arms around Chen Xing, pulling him entirely into his embrace. As he did so, the Heart Lamp began to glow weakly from Chen Xing's slender form, and its light circulated through both of their bodies. Like spiritual qi, the Heart Lamp's mana circulated endlessly within his meridians. It felt exactly the same as every time he'd borrowed mana from Chen Xing.

Xiang Shu closed his eyes to better control his internal qi, aiming to direct the mana flowing ceaselessly into his body in a full loop. He embraced Chen Xing, burying his head against his shoulder, and circulated the energy through him and back to Chen Xing.

For a split second, the Heart Lamp flashed, and its power increased exponentially. In that instant, Xiang Shu found himself pulled into the sea of Chen Xing's consciousness.

Chen Xing bobbed along in a dark, endless ocean, his body glowing with the Heart Lamp's light. The shimmering outline of a ghostly dragon took form, circling above the surface of the ocean and glancing around in all directions. When it finally spotted him, it flew through the night sky and approached Chen Xing where he floated on the surface of the sea. It coiled around him, bobbing up and down but ultimately not touching him.

In the darkness, amid stormy waves, Chen Xing opened his eyes in astonishment. That huge dragon—the manifestation of a soul—moved with Chen Xing as they drifted across the ocean's surface. Like a loyal guard, it

stopped the tempestuous waves from reaching him, but still it did not touch him.

The feeling was familiar. Chen Xing had felt something just like it that night on the boat with Xiang Shu, when they had been completely honest with each other. Through that pitch-black night, the ship had pressed forward, listing as lighting forked through the sky overhead and wild winds formed a tornado. Through it all, one lamp on the ship had remained eternally lit.

Xiang Shu kept on circulating his inner qi, completing that loop again and again. The light of the Heart Lamp waxed and waned, but each time its glow peaked, it shone brighter and more brilliantly than the last. As if the black and white fish of the taiji were circling within their bodies, power cycled through them, protecting the last remaining light in the mortal realm amidst the Silence of All Magic's long night.

Xiang Shu's freshly showered body smelled of incense and clean skin, and soon dense clusters of sweat beaded on his beautiful muscles. Chen Xing's breaths became scorching hot, and though he was still dreaming, his sweat had soaked his inner robe, revealing the slim, youthful figure underneath. His eyebrows were knit together as if, inside that dream ocean, he and Xiang Shu were lighting up the Heart Lamp again and again, each time experiencing an earth-shaking climax that could topple mountains and overturn seas.

Finally, the Heart Lamp's warm light returned to Chen Xing's three immortal souls and seven mortal forms. Xiang Shu let out an exhausted sigh, his entire body drenched in sweat. His black pants were soaked through, and they clung to his skin, hugging his beautiful long legs and their

well-formed muscles. He wanted to climb off the bed to take another bath, but Chen Xing held onto his waist and refused to let go.

In Chen Xing's consciousness, the dragon coiled around him had disappeared. The ocean's furious waves had calmed, and the still waters reflected the bright stars in the night sky overhead. In the sky, on the ocean, within that dream, the Milky Way filled the entire world, and he felt as if he was floating in a sea of stars. He opened his eyes and gazed toward the starry vault above him.

"It's so beautiful," Chen Xing mumbled. "Huh? Wait, where's the dragon? Where's my dragon? Don't go!"

Chen Xing sat up hastily. He was awake, the sun was shining, and he could hear the chirping of birds. His entire body felt like it was about to fall apart. "How long did I sleep for this time?"

The person by his side was not Xiang Shu but Xiao Shan. Xiao Shan was looking down at a dagger in his hands, cleaning it. "Not very long. Three days."

"Oh? Only three days this time? How are things now? Xiang Shu—Oh, Gu Qing, what about Gu Qing?"

"She's going to die," Xiao Shan said, "just like Lu Ying."

Chen Xing got up and rushed out into the next hall, where he found Gu Qing lying on a bed. Half of her body had rotted away. Feng Qianjun knelt next to her like a stone statue, and Xie Daoyun, it seemed, had fallen asleep off to the side.

Feng Qianjun looked back and saw that Chen Xing had come. "Oh, you're awake."

Chen Xing's legs felt a little weak. Like before, Xiang Shu had been the one looking after him over the past few days, but this time, Xiang Shu hadn't stayed by his bedside until he woke. Instead, after feeding Chen Xing and wiping his body down every day, he had Xiao Shan stand guard while he went to talk with Xie An. In the evenings, he returned to sleep in the same bed as Chen Xing.

"Let me see," Chen Xing said. He sat down by the side of the bed and lifted the blankets aside. Xie Daoyun woke up, but neither she nor Chen Xing spoke to Feng Qianjun.

Unsurprisingly, they had discussed the matter over and over while Chen Xing slept, from all possible perspectives. Xiang Shu must have rejected the idea that Chen Xing could save Gu Qing after he woke up. They hadn't been able to save Lu Ying at Carosha, so there was no hope for an ordinary person like Gu Qing. In the months during which she was possessed by Wang Ziye, Gu Qing had suffered from the constant corrosive damage of resentment; by this point, she was no different from a living corpse. Xie Daoyun had used medicines to extend her lifespan, and she had spent every day lying in bed in unendurable agony.

"I have something…I want to say to you," she said in a low voice. "Chen… Chen Xing…"

Chen Xing grasped her hand. Though he had long since predicted this outcome, his heart was full of pain. "I will get rid of Shi Hai," he said quietly. "I promise you this, Gu Qing."

"I-in my dreams, I saw…many things. I felt that…I had to hold out until you woke up. Telling you might…be helpful to you all. The Martial

God said you would wake soon… He was thinking of ways to make you better…”

Chen Xing was shocked. “You saw Wang Ziye’s memories?” he said, his voice trembling a little.

“Yes… Yes,” Gu Qing gasped out. “And…the Dinghai Pearl.”

So as not to miss the moment when Chen Xing woke up, Gu Qing had told Xiang Shu and the others this before. All she wanted was for Chen Xing to wake up so that she could repeat it in her own words and prevent any information from getting lost in transit.

“I’ll go call the Martial God over,” Xie Daoyun said, and soon they were joined by Xiang Shu and Xie An.

Gu Qing was on her last breath. “Wang Ziye… He thinks that, in Luoyang, in the Longmen Mountains, there is a very important place,” she said brokenly, “which…has to do with the Dinghai Pearl. Only he…can’t get in. That gate has been sealed.”

“A gate?” Chen Xing asked.

With great effort, Gu Qing shook her head. “There was once…an exorcist…who went into the Longmen Mountains, who finally sealed that gate. Wang Ziye, he…has revived many drought fiends, and they’re standing guard outside that gate.”

“The Luoyang drought fiends’ military encampment,” Xiang Shu supplied, listening from the side.

Gu Qing closed her eyes. “He… In one place, he found the intersection of the earth veins, and he wants…Qin and Jin to clash there… I saw a river beside an overgrown forest…and on the river was a wooden bridge.”

“The Fei River,” Xie An said.

“I don’t know,” Gu Qing whispered. “Over there, he wanted to… make a sacrificial altar, to offer up a certain item.”

“We’ve already investigated underneath the Fei River, but unfortunately we found nothing.”

Chen Xing shushed Xie An. “Was it a heart?”

Gu Qing just barely managed to nod her head. Her face was gray, and it seemed to require a great effort to turn her head and look at Chen Xing, pleading with her eyes.

“To complete the ceremony of shifting vessels, he needs…to open a gate in the Longmen Mountains,” Gu Qing continued, her breathing weakening. “The thing inside that gate… To him, it is something very important, and if he can’t open it before Fu Jian sends out his troops…he will abandon…his original plan…and seek a lesser alternative…”

“And what is that lesser alternative?” Chen Xing asked.

“A dragon can be used as…the demon god’s body. His thoughts were too jumbled…”

“A jiao?” Chen Xing frowned. If that was the case, then it was good that they had thrown caution to the wind and gotten rid of that jiao.

“He…still has other options. There are still other people, new people to pick from. A…tall man, an emperor… He must… No matter what, he must be stopped.”

“Fu Jian,” Xiang Shu filled in. “If Shi Hai cannot get the Heart Lamp and use the Dinghai Pearl as the vessel for the Demon God’s reincarnation,

then he'll settle for what he has. He'll use the jiao. If that also doesn't work, then he'll change his target to Fu Jian."

Chen Xing gripped Gu Qing's hand tightly.

"I saw his memories. I saw him being torn into pieces, buried under the ground. His three immortal souls and seven mortal forms struggled endlessly, for hundreds of years, thousands of years, suffering in the dark, without the light of day…" Gu Qing paused for a long moment, catching her breath. "I also saw… He once loved a woman, a very, very long time ago… Every person suffers, but why did death not grant him release? He was once an ordinary person."

"Let them be alone for a bit," Xiang Shu said. "That was all the information she told us over the past few days."

Xiao Shan, Xie An, Chen Xing, Xie Daoyun, and Xiang Shu left the bedroom and went to stand in the imperial gardens outside the door. Chen Xing was reeling. Xiang Shu handed him the Dinghai Pearl, and he accepted it wordlessly.

"So we do have to go to Luoyang, as we thought?" Chen Xing asked. Nobody responded. Chen Xing looked around at all of them and forced himself to smile. "We wasted a lot of time, but it's all right. We have a clue to go on now, at least."

"We obtained this clue in exchange for Qing-er's life," Xie Daoyun said. "The price was far too high."

The truth of her words landed heavily on Chen Xing, and he couldn't smile anymore.

"His Majesty is grateful that you all defended his Great Jin's legitimacy and the Mandate of Heaven by getting rid of that monster," said

Xie An. “To show his gratitude, he’s willing to send out a group of diplomatic envoys to protect you during your investigations.”

“Protector, what do you think?” Chen Xing asked.

Xiang Shu didn’t say a thing at first. Chen Xing thought of the harsh words he had spoken to him during the fight at the Huai River, and of the blow he had landed afterward. Swinging fists was one thing, but he doubted that had made Xiang Shu angry; the blow would have sobered him up.

What had hurt him was those three words Chen Xing had uttered: *“Then just leave.”*

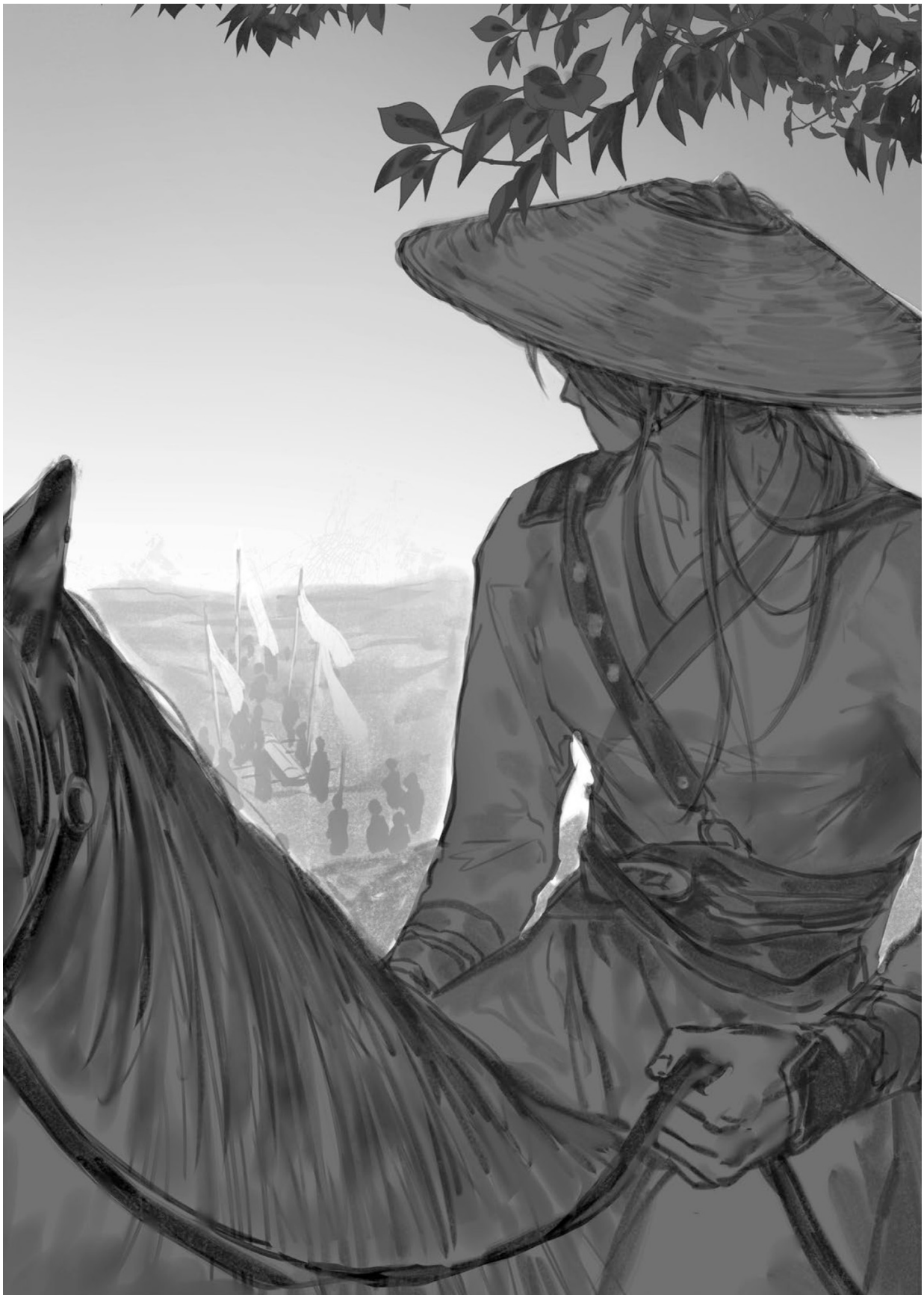
Finally, Xiang Shu responded in the affirmative.

“Sorry,” Chen Xing said.

“What are you sorry for?” Xiang Shu asked mildly. “You don’t need to apologize to anyone. You were always doing what you felt was right. It was I who forgot the reason you came to find me in the first place.”

Chen Xing wanted to explain things to him, but Xiang Shu wasn’t interested in hearing anything else he had to say. Instead, he turned to Xie An and raised an eyebrow.

Xie An nodded. “His Majesty has gotten everything ready over the past few days. It was only because of Gu Qing’s circumstances, and because you, Shidi, were unconscious in bed, that I thought you all would have to eventually—”



The door opened, and Feng Qianjun stepped out. The grim expression on his face had grown even darker. He didn't cry; he simply said in a quiet tone, "She's gone."

"Then let's prepare to set off," Xiang Shu said gruffly. "We all have too many new and old grudges, and we need to find Wang Ziye to settle them."

With that, he turned and left.

The next day, the Gu family held a funeral procession for Gu Qing. The Great Jin sent out a squad of envoys, a line of people on horseback who came to a stop in front of Mount Zhong and watched the procession from afar.

"The marsh orchids spread over the path, and the road is gradually changing," Feng Qianjun sang.[12] A spring breeze ruffled his hair.

"Onward, the waters of the river flow, and maples grow above," Chen Xing joined in quietly.

"The gaze travels thousands of miles, and the heart breaks with sorrow…" Feng Qianjun kicked his horse into motion and, leading the group, departed from Mount Zhong.

"May the souls of the deceased return. Mourn, Jiangnan!"

The song carried into the distance. Clouds roiled over the great lands of the north.

One year and nine months remained before that fateful moment in Chen Xing's life. He did not know what awaited him on the road ahead, but

a certainty swelled in his heart: that due to his stubborn persistence, the “mandate of heaven” was still on his side, as it had been from the start.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Dinghai Fusheng Records

VOLUME 4

CHARACTER GUIDE & GLOSSARY

Characters

CHEN XING 陈星: The last exorcist, tasked by his shifu with a quest to restore magic to the world before catastrophe strikes. He has uncommonly good luck, but it will run out in four years, when he is twenty years old.

XIANG SHU 项述: Also known as Shulü Kong (述律空), once the Great Chanyu of the Hu people. Xiang Shu is the man Chen Xing's Heart Lamp has designated his Protector Martial God.

The Ancient Chi Le Covenant

FENG QIANJUN 冯千钧: A skilled swordsman who accompanies Chen Xing and Xiang Shu.

XIE AN 謝安: A Jin official who met Chen Xing's shifu many years ago and considers Chen Xing his fellow disciple.

SIMA YAO 司馬曜: The Emperor of Jin.

GU QING 顾青: Feng Qianjun's fiancée. Bears a striking resemblance to Princess Qinghe.

XIE DAOYUN 谢道韫: Xie An's niece, a doctor.

WEN ZHE 温哲: Head of Dongzhe Bank—actually both a man in disguise and an undead exorcist. ago.

Great Qin

FU JIAN 苻坚: The Emperor of Qin and the leader of the Five Hu.

WANG ZIYE 王子夜: Shi Hai's false identity at the Qin court, which he uses to manipulate Fu Jian.

TUOBA YAN 拓跋焱: The young commander of the imperial guards. Very fond of Chen Xing.

MURONG CHONG 慕容冲: Head of the Murong clan. Fu Jian favors him for his beauty.

PRINCESS QINGHE 清河公主: Murong Chong's sister and Fu Jian's concubine. Deceased thanks to Chiyou's machinations.

Chiyou's Forces

CHIYOU 蚩尤: The Demon God and God of War. His blood is what causes mortals to transform into the living dead.

SHI HAI 尸亥: A powerful undead entity who acts as Chiyou's underling and carries out his will in the mortal world.

SIMA YUE 司馬越: One of the eight princes who died during the War of the Eight Princes, now resurrected as a drought fiend along with his brothers, including Sima Liang, Sima Yi and Sima Ying.

SIMA WEI 司马玮: Another prince resurrected as a drought fiend; Sima Wei seems to have a will of his own, unlike the other undead generals.

Other

XIAO SHAN 肖山: A young boy raised by wolves who was entrusted to Chen Xing's care.

XIANG YUYAN 项语嫣: Xiang Shu's deceased mother, a Han woman who came to live at Chi Le Chuan twenty-two years ago—via time travel.

ZHANG LIU 张留: An exorcist from three hundred years prior to the events of the story. Along with Xiang Yuyan, he brought about the Silence of All Magic by sealing the Spiritual Qi of the Heavens and Earth in the Dinghai Pearl.

BAILI LUN 百里伦: Chen Xing's shifu.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags:

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DOUBLING: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

DA-: A prefix meaning big/older.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

-ER: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally "son" or "child." Always a suffix. Can sometimes be a fixed part of a person's name, rather than just an affectionate suffix.

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE/DAGE: Older brother or an older male friend.

JIE/JIEJIE: Older sister or an older female friend.

SHIFU: Master; teacher.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother. Usually implies that they studied under the same shifu.

DAREN: Similar to “milord,” a way of respectfully addressing someone who is either an aristocrat or a government official of medium or higher rank.

XIANDI: A respectful term of address for a younger man the speaker isn’t particularly close to. It is archaic in modern Chinese.

LAOYE: Literally “grandfather,” used as a term of address for the master of a household.

SHAOYE: Young master.

SHAOZHU: Young master; specifically the direct heir of a household.

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and

more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Note on Spelling

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

General Consonants

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

General Vowels

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **yo**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

Glossary

SUI XING: An archaic name for the planet Jupiter.

YAO: Supernatural beings, ghosts, and spirits—similar to the term "yokai" in Japanese.

HU PEOPLE: Hu is a historical term for non-Han people, sometimes translated as "barbarians." It is often associated specifically with horseback riders from the steppes to the north and west of the Central Plains.

MARTIAL ARTS: In wuxia fiction and other fantasy that borrows from it, it is common for martial arts practitioners to possess heightened senses as a result of honing their physical abilities. A skilled martial artist may be able to hear or see things other people can't.

MARA: A demon from Buddhist mythology associated with darkness and death. In addition to death and destruction, Mara traditionally represents obstruction to enlightenment.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls that represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms that remain with the

body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but Daoism commonly features three hun and seven po.

TIMEKEEPING: For much of Chinese history, time was measured in two-hour increments, starting at 11:00 p.m. The hours in this system are zi, chou, yin, mao, chen, si, wu, wei, shen, you, xu, and hai.

Timeline of Historical Events

QIN DYNASTY (221–206 BCE): The first official dynasty of China that scholars can agree upon. Everything before this (the Three Emperors and Five Sovereigns, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties) is considered mytho-historical. Qin Shihuang was the first emperor, and the dynasty only lasted through his son before it fell.

CHU-HAN CONTENTION (206–202 BCE): Technically composed of two parts—the Eighteen Kingdoms, during which warlords fought for the right to rule, and the Chu-Han period, during which the Chu and Han kingdoms, led by Xiang Yu and Liu Bang respectively, fought. Liu Bang won the decisive Battle of Gaixia in 202 BCE, thus ending the conflict.

HAN DYNASTY (202 BCE–220 CE): Established by Liu Bang. It was considered a golden age, and the “Han” name was passed down to the people, the language, and the culture that stemmed from it.

THREE KINGDOMS (220–280 CE): A period of conflict where three main kingdoms—Wei (ruled by the Cao family), Wu (ruled by the Sun family), and Shu (ruled by the Liu family)—fought for the right to rule. The conflict technically began with the end of the Han dynasty, with many warlords fighting for the upper hand, but eventually settled into these three factions.

WESTERN JIN DYNASTY (266–316 CE): Ruled by the Sima dynasty, who ended the Three Kingdoms era in 280 CE after officially conquering Eastern Wu.

WAR OF THE EIGHT PRINCES (291–306 CE): A war fought between eight princes of the Western Jin dynasty, all with the family name Sima, over who would be the regent during the reign of Emperor Hui. The aftermath led to the era of the Sixteen Kingdoms in the north and the reign of the Eastern Jin dynasty in the south.

UPRISING OF THE FIVE HU (304–316 CE): This took place in conjunction with the War of the Eight Princes. The combination of all this fighting eventually led to the downfall of the Western Jin dynasty.

SIXTEEN KINGDOMS/STATES (304–439 CE): An era in the north where sixteen kingdoms, ruled by a quick succession of Hu and Han both, came and went. The term “Sixteen Kingdoms” is often used in conjunction with the Five Hu, due to the significant role that the Hu played during this time. The dominant kingdom during the time period of *Dinghai Fusheng Records*

is the Qin state, led by Fu Jian. (Fu Jian's dynasty is known as the Former Qin in historiographical settings to distinguish it from other, later dynasties also named Qin, but at the time it would have simply been referred to as Qin.)

EASTERN JIN DYNASTY (317–420 CE): The period *Dinghai Fusheng Records* is set in. During this period, the two main forces were the Eastern Jin Dynasty in the south and the Qin Dynasty in the north.

Footnotes

Chapter 48

[1] Modern-day Sichuan.

[2] A famous historical calligrapher who influenced both Chinese and Japanese calligraphy.

Chapter 58

[3] A famous battle that took place around 1046 BC between the Zhou Dynasty and the Shang Dynasty, marking the end of the Shang and the rise of the Zhou.

Chapter 59

[4] In the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, at the famous Battle of Chibi, Zhuge Liang (courtesy name Kongming) is portrayed standing on the Altar of the Seven Stars and using magical arts to call down the eastern and southern winds to do his bidding.

Chapter 60

[5] A jiao is a kind of lesser aquatic dragon; a water snake is said to be able to become a jiao through cultivation, and a jiao in turn may be able to cultivate into a true dragon.

Chapter 64

[6] “Qing” is an ancient honorific used to address someone of a high rank or authority in the imperial court.

Chapter 65

[7] The real Sima Yao, Emperor Xiaowu of Jin, was famously murdered by his favorite concubine after he insulted her. He would have been thirty-three or thirty-four years old at the time.

[8] This is a title bestowed by the emperor on a man who isn’t of royal blood but who has been named a prince because of his achievements.

Chapter 70

[9] The nine bestowments were an award whose supposed purpose was to recognize a court official for their accomplishments; however, as implied in this case, those who demanded this accolade often did so in order to demonstrate their control over the emperor and the court.

Chapter 72

[10] These are both locations far to the west of where they are now. Historical Shazhou is the modern-day province of Qinghai and the Tibet Autonomous Region, and the Loulan Kingdom was located along the Silk Road.

Chapter 73

[11] A Renwu year is the nineteenth year of the sixty-year cycle in the Chinese zodiac.

Chapter 75

[12] “Summons of the Soul,” from the Songs of Chu, written in the Warring States period (475–221 BC) by Qu Yuan.

A DEADLY PRICE

The bustling capital of the southern Jin Empire, Jiankang, offers the illusion of safety—but for Chen Xing and Xiang Shu, it may hold more danger than they bargained for. The Demon God Chiyou's influence has already reached the south, and his forces are gathering.

To end the Silence of All Magic, they must uncover the truth behind the mythical Dinghai Pearl. But the deeper they dig, the more Xiang Shu discovers an impossible connection between the Pearl's long-lost creator and his own past.

With the world's magic gone, Chen Xing's Heart Lamp is the only light that can hold back the darkness. But every time he uses it, it drains his life force—leaving him weaker, and the toll growing with each battle. Chen Xing is ready to make that sacrifice but Xiang Shu is not willing to let him.

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